West Bound

by DopeScotlandWarrior

Summary

Claire Beauchamp is leaving Boston and moving her surgical practice and horses to Arizona. Jaime Fraser is a world-class champion who leads Claire back to a passion she gave up when the wrong man said I love you. Trouble finds Claire in the cut-throat, competitive sport of the equestrian but she has Jaime, Angus and Rupert behind her.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Driving across the country alone can be daunting, especially if you are a young woman alone, pulling two horses. When Claire decided to escape Boston and move out west she planned meticulously, analyzed her vehicle and trailer options, and found the most suitable barn once she arrived. She sold her brownstone fully furnished. The only possessions going with her were her clothes, tack, and horses. She also purchased a new cowboy hat and a new pair of sexy sunglasses. She looked at her tight jeans and western shirt, put her hat and glasses on, and decided by the time she reached Arizona they would feel like a second skin. She still had trouble walking in anything less than a three-inch heel but that would come with practice.

Yesterday she turned the keys of her surgical practice over to the new owners without a second thought. Same with closing on her home last week for a cool 1.8 million cash. There was no sentimental pull or sadness. She felt utterly detached from her home of twenty-five years. Whatever made her feel so cold inside she hoped would be cured in Arizona. The last item on her list was to load the horses and get on the road. It was four o’clock in the morning.

Claire carried her grooming and wrapping bucket into the first stall and was greeted with a horse hug from Fred. She paused and hugged him coo’ing about their adventure. Fifteen minutes later she got the same hug from Ginger and got busy brushing, braiding, and wrapping tail and legs. “Don’t you two look fancy!” She led Fred to the trailer and walked him up the ramp and snapped him in. He was overjoyed at the heap of hay in the feeder and started eating. Next came Ginger up the ramp, a little more nervous but Claire was gentle and reassuring. With everything stowed Claire pulled out of the stables for the last time.

She loved this truck, a full-sized Ram with a matching trailer. The luxury interior package included ergonomic seats, blue tooth in the steering wheel, navigation, rear video, interior trailer video, and a bunch of stuff she had not found yet. All on voice command. “Change to interior video.” Claire watched Fred and Ginger munch on their breakfast. “You guys look happy. Here we go.”

She would drive for twelve hours stopping for 30 minutes to let the horses out at mid-day. She had reservations for each night at a B&B that also rented stalls and came recommended by her equestrian association for safety. Fred and Ginger were very special horses that were trained for therapy. Chosen for their docile and loving nature they were among the first group of horses trained at the equestrian therapeutics Institute. “And I’m taking them to Arizona,” she said with a giggle.

Claire had romanticized the first sunrise of her new life seeing the light coming up on a sleeping city as she barreled down the freeway. Reality is sometimes disappointing as commuters swarmed her on all four sides making her head whip between her mirrors and the video trying to negotiate each lane change. She saw her exit coming up fast and had two death-defying lanes to cross and no friendly commuters to allow her to move over. She was covered in sweat but made the exit and took a deep calming breath. “Holy shit.”

The drive became much easier once she was out of commuter traffic. She set the cruise control, popped in a CD and opened her window. “interior video,” all she saw was horse teeth as Ginger was tasting the little camera above her head. “What a goofball.”

Claire gripped the steering wheel when she pulled into the B&B. She was so tired she almost fell out of the truck when the door opened. She hurried to register and get the horses out of the trailer. It was a beautiful property with ample outdoor lighting. The owners offered her use of the arena and Claire was grateful. Once both were inside she closed the gate and clapped her hands sending them both speeding, bucking, and snorting around the large arena. Claire laughed at the high tails and swinging
heads, pure horse happiness after a long stressful day. Ginger loped up to her and spread frothy goobers down her face. “Ew, Jesus Ginger!”

Once Fred and Ginger were safe in their stalls with food and water Claire got to her room, grabbed a robe and towel and headed for a hot shower. The soap smelled heavenly, the water was soft and Claire started to relax. Then the lights went out and the water turned ice cold. She shrieked trying to find the faucets in the dark to turn the water off. Groping for the towel, then her robe, then the door handle. She saw little emergency lights along the hall. Thank God she thought as she shivered down the hall looking for her room. She bumped into the manager in the hall and he used a flashlight to help her find her room. He pointed to a battery-operated light on the desk and she had enough light to find the bed. Fatigue pulled her to a blissfully dreamless sleep. At three o’clock in the morning, the power came back on and her room lit up with multiple lamps. She turned them off quickly and jumped back in bed squeezing her eyes shut and waiting. “Damn it! I really need a few more hours,” she whined.

The safety locks snapped down on the trailer doors, horses were brushed and re-wrapped and the Dodge roared to life. Claire was tired but anxious to put another two states behind her. She had one hour of unimpeded travel before the swarms of commuters came from all directions. Traffic slowed to a crawl for ten miles and finally opened up for normal speeds. She set the cruise, turned up the music, opened her window and felt the first pang of…what? Loneliness, sadness, loss, yearning? She couldn’t decide so she turned the music up louder, checked the video, and pushed the pedal. Why not? She never had a speeding ticket in her twenty-five years. She was due. She set the cruise at 75 and sang to the music. She felt absolutely wicked speeding down the highway and hadn’t noticed the speed limit postings were 75 MPH.

Another B&B, another early rise to load the horses and another long highway stretched before her. She saw the signs to Phoenix on the fourth day and let out a whoop! Followed by Fred kicking the trailer sides in protest. She turned the interior video on and blew kisses to her favorite couple. “We are almost home you guys!”

Mid-afternoon she followed the exit to Mesa and headed East. Traffic was light and she looked at the buildings along the highway. She wondered if she would travel this highway a lot in the future. She flew through Mesa and finally saw her exit to Ironwood Drive. Her navigation turned her North for seven miles. She was so ready to put the horses up in their new home and then find a hotel for the night. This was the only night she didn’t prebook because she could easily find lodging for herself. She decided to find something with a huge bathtub and a full room service menu. She couldn’t wait.

She drove into the foothills and gasped at the sight in the rearview mirror. The valley floor spread out beneath her and she wondered what that must look like at night. There was desert all around her, exotic and beautiful. Tall Saguaro cactus loomed above her showing two and three arms raised in greeting she thought. Her heart was pounding as she turned into Fraser Equestrian. The place took her breath away and she stopped to just look at the multiple paddocks and pastures, deep green against the desert brown. New foals were sticking close to their mothers, and horses in the adjoining pen straining to see and smell. She pulled up the long drive and pulled next to the main barn. It was white with forest green trim and she counted twenty stall doors along one side with horses peering out half doors to look at her. It was glorious and a fitting home for Fred and Ginger.

“Good afternoon!” Claire turned to see two men walking toward her. They offered their hand to her and she shook them smiling.

“I am Claire Beauchamp, I have rented two stalls for my guys here.” They looked at the two rumps in the trailer and smiled.
“I’m Rupert and this is Angus. C’mon lets see where Jaime has put ya.” Claire followed. She spoke to Jaime Fraser on the phone from Boston and thought him friendly but a bit aloof. The bur from these two men sounded like him, so they were probably from the same area of Scotland. They walked the length of the barn without finding Jaime. The large board near the office had her name on two stalls where she was escorted.

“No, this is not what we agreed to! I rented two stalls that had doors to the outside, not interior stalls, and they have to be together.” Claire was overtired and getting upset. She wanted to be friendly but she just didn’t have it in her. Rupert suggested putting the horses up for the night and Jaime would figure it out tomorrow. Claire was too tired to argue and went to fetch Fred and Ginger from the trailer. Rupert watched her walk away with interest. He whistled low, appreciating the tight jeans, long legs, and champion ass.

“Can I help ye lass?” Claire gratefully accepted Rupert’s offer to lead Ginger to her stall.

“We can feed them tonight, what do they get?” Claire eased Fred down the ramp.

“They both get two flakes and a scoop of grain” she called. Rupert walked in a zigzag and noticed Ginger’s nose stayed three inches from his right shoulder. “Yer a good lassie, aye?”

When Claire walked Fred into his stall there was already grain and hay waiting for him. She leaned against him and dropped her head on his back. He moved into her and waited like he would with a child or challenged adult.

“I love you, Fred.”

Claire pulled out of the equestrian center and asked Siri for the closest hotel. The fourth motel Siri directed her to was as run down and frightening as the first three. Her fatigue was mounting and she did not know what to do. It was late and she just couldn’t drive anymore. She headed back to the center and curled up in the corner of Fred’s stall with a blanket. The wood chips smelled new and she was out in seconds. She dreamed of dancing with him in his shiny shoes and impeccable suit. He expertly twirled her around the dance floor. She felt graceful and adored, and her skirt flowed up her legs as he spun her.

“Hey!”

Claire’s head snapped up and she saw Fred startle at the loud noise. She tried to focus at the man coming into Fred’s stall.

“C’mon lass, this is no place to sleep, for a human anyway. Are ye doctor Beauchamp?”

Claire shook her head and blinked hard. Too many nights with little sleep made her groggy and weak. She stood up holding her blanket in front of her. She looked like a scared little girl and her first step pitched her forward landing in strong warm arms. She looked up at the face attached to those arms. “Wow,” came as a whisper followed by her hand clamped tight against her mouth.

“I, I’m sorry, yes I’m Dr. Beauchamp and this is Fred who is my horse and I couldn’t find a suitable hotel and Fred said I could bunk with him tonight.” Her last sentence was an effort to speak and she looked back at the corner she slept in and started moving toward it. Those annoying arms stopped her and she looked at him sharply.

“Alright lass, ye sleepin on my couch tonight.” He pulled her along and closed the stall taking her blanket. He stopped to make a note on the board and Claire sunk into a corner and closed her eyes. She was asleep before he turned around.
“Wait just a second lass, ye canna sleep there either.” He pulled Claire to her feet among strong protests and guided her out of the barn and into his golf cart.

“I’ll have ye wrapped and snug in two minutes Dr. Beauchamp.” He drove toward the house and felt her head come down on his shoulder. She was unconscious and Jaime chuckled.

“You musta left Boston with the devil chasin ye lass.” The house was set away from the center on a beautiful lawn of green grass with lights along the tiered walkway. He lifted Claire against his chest and carried her into the house. He pulled the blanket up to her chin and she snuggled down into it.

“Thank you, mister, um, mister.” Jaime smiled at her. Noticing her long black hair tangled into her fingers he pulled her hand away and gently pulled the hair out.

“Well then, you’re a beautiful girl doctor Beauchamp, alone in the Arizona desert. What has someone done to make ye run so far?” Jaime estimated her sleep deprivation would keep her down at least until he woke up with the dawn. He climbed the wide circular staircase pulling off his shirt as he walked into his bathroom. He stripped the rest of the way and turned the knobs that shot warm water out of three heads. He stood still and let the hot water release his muscles and back. He thought about that beautiful face asleep on his couch. A doctor from Boston. He was very intrigued. He slipped into sweats and a t-shirt and stood at the railing of his upstairs loft looking down at her. He eventually dropped his body into his king-sized bed and barely threw the quilt up before he passed out.

Claire’s eyes popped open at five o’clock in the morning. Her surroundings confused her at first and then she remembered the owner catching her asleep in Fred’s stall. “I am an idiot,” she said quietly. She folded the extra blanket and pulled out a note pad from her purse to say thank you. Then she crept quietly to the door to slip out but the open door tripped the alarm bells which were loud enough to wake the dead, and Fraser, who flew down the stairs and punched in the code for quiet.

“Jesus H Roosevelt Christ! I am so sorry Mr. Fraser, I didn’t think, I didn’t want, …” Claire hoped she would evaporate in her misery but she was still there. She just looked down and shook her head.

Jaime took the opportunity to notice her long legs, long arms, and long hair, then looked up to her eyes as she lifted her head. He was stuck and staring at the most gorgeous eyes he had ever seen. They were the color of good whiskey and rimmed with dark brown making them look beautiful and exotic. He recovered quickly and tried to make Claire feel better.

“Tis fine lass had to get up now anyway. Would you like some coffee before you leave?” Take the coffee, please, he thought. I like lookin at ye and yer too rattled to drive.

“Another time perhaps, I’m sorry about the alarm and thank you for the rescue last night. Goodbye, Mr. Fraser.”

Jaime chuckled, at the slamming door. He watched her run for the barn and admired the backside of her not seen before. Her application to rent two stalls described her horses as therapeutic and gave impressive training credentials. It would be a pleasant change to have a nice lady doctor with docile horses for a change. He was sick of the cut-throat competition equestrians inspired, including his girlfriend. He picked up his cell phone. “Laoghaire my darlin where ye been? Ye have a show this weekend and ye horse needs some work. Call me.” He dropped the phone thinking about his blonde lass with cherry cheeks and a body to stop a mack truck. Put her in a tight riding jacket and the judges soon forget why they were there. It’s a good thing, she hasn’t been able to ride out of a paper bag lately.
Chapter 2

At first, Jaime admired Laoghaire’s determination and the hero worship didn’t hurt. He always drew a crowd but Laoghaire was absolutely spellbound by him. He enjoyed her company and coached her through some impressive wins. She would show up with a bucket of chicken and a video about once per week and Jaime found her enticing company. One night he was called to the barn to check a mare in foal. Laoghaire was naked in his bed when he returned. Not so hard to fall into that relationship.

Jaime made his living training show horses with a strong specialty in jumpers, eventing, and dressage. His early training was on the family farm in Scotland where the horses actually did the training of young riders because there was no formal teaching. At five years old his father put him atop of a gentle mare in a round pen and walked away to finish the day's chores. He figured it out by super time and coaxed the mare into a walk, trot, and stop. Three days later he had the lope down and finally found something fun to do with this beast. He liked going fast.

Jaime fell in love with horses once he understood them. When he grew into his body and skills he was called on by people in the surrounding area when they had a horse that would not break. When his parents arranged to swap farms for one year with a family in Texas he felt his world was falling apart. They would work each other's farms and go back to their own when the year was done. Jaime fought his parents about going because his life was in the Highlands he loved. What he learned about America sounded terrible. All flat and tons of concrete. He hated the idea. His da was overjoyed to have his children learn about American culture and planned several trips to famous places during the year. He ignored his son’s protests.

The family settled into a mid-sized farm in Texas. Jamie had his usual chores, school, and boredom for four or five hours a day. He would walk the fields and think of Scotland and his friends, wishing he could go home. One afternoon he walked to a neighboring property that boarded horses. There were several arenas and paddocks with long barns. He saw a horse and rider with a tiny saddle that lacked a horn, he wondered how she stayed up there. Three men were in the ring watching the rider push the horse through gates he had never seen. His interest was piqued. He watched the rider’s body and noticed most of the communication with the horse was done with her legs. The men seemed to indicate toward the fancy poles in the middle and the rider pushed her mount over the objects and poles. He saw how she moved into a jumping position and followed the horse's mouth with her hands as they soared over the high jumps. The men seemed satisfied and the rider walked the heated horse as they left the arena.

She rode up next to Jaime and said hello. When she saw him smile her gaze lingered on his face for a moment. Jaime could not stop himself from leaping over the fence to walk beside her. He asked so many questions the rider laughed and when she dismounted she shook his hand. “I’m Gellis Dunkin and this is my barn. You sound like you just got off the boat from Scotland.” Jaime smiled, “it was a plane.” Gellis laughed at his boyhood charm and let him carry the saddle for her and put the horse up. He was unaware of course that he was helping the woman who would change his life forever.

Claire spent two days looking at houses to rent becoming more discouraged with each viewing. She could not see her happiness in the gated communities of custom snobbery nor could she live on an acre of dirt where everything looked dead. She had one more place to see today and her navigation system was ordering turns every couple of minutes as she climbed higher into the foothills. “Your destination is on the right.” She slammed the brakes and looked around thinking the nav was broken. She looked at her notes from the realtor who materialized at her side window scaring the shit out of her. “Jesus H Roosevelt Christ! Harry, you scared the crap out of me. Get in and show me where this
place is please.” He directed her around the corner where the driveway went up at a steep angle and wound around the front of a beautiful house.

Harry looked at Claire before climbing out of the enormous truck. It’s small but I think you’ll like the view. He indicated behind her. When she turned around her world tilted, her mouth opened, and she gasped. “Oh God Harry! That is stunning!” Rising up in front of her was the Goldfield mountain range. The sun made it look many shades of gold, red, and purple. “It’s the most photographed mountain in the world.” Harry laughed like he couldn’t understand why. “Let’s go have a look.” Claire walked backward to Harry because she couldn’t get enough of the view.

She turned to walk into her new house. That mountain had spoken to her and she wanted to hear it every day. She first noticed the entire wall of huge windows that faced the mountain. The home had clean lines and modern architecture. There were two bedrooms, a great room that included a large table for guests and a modern chefs kitchen. Harry walked to the back wall telling Claire this was his favorite part. He threw a latch and pushed the large panels of glass and doors into a recess in the wall. It opened the kitchen to a backyard patio that was professionally landscaped with astroturf, flowering bushes, and heat tolerant plants. Claire was in heaven. Bringing the outside in, what a concept.

“How much?” Harry cleared his throat, “well ah, the owners are going through a divorce so it is only for rent. They have guaranteed that the renter, with perfect payments, will have first right of refusal.” Claire turned in a circle and was delighted to find the perfect home. Harry continued to point out special lighting and a pool off the bedroom but Claire wasn’t listening anymore. This house was perfect and she wanted to finish the deal and look in on Fred and Ginger. She wrote a check for six months.

It seemed to take hours but Harry finally left with check in hand. Claire called to him with a question, “do you know where the Fraser Equestrian Center is?” Harry laughed and pointed at a small hill, “Just on the other side.” He laughed and waved goodbye. Claire was incredulous and didn’t believe him. She walked down the driveway and passed the hill and there it was spread out before her. She could see riders in the arena, and Rupert hauling hay. She jumped up and down with excitement. Perfect!

Jaime was meeting with members of the pony club who have their annual show at his place. For him it was mostly charity because he loved what the pony club did for very young riders. His head jerked up when his door opened and was ready to take someone’s head off at the rude intrusion. Laoghaire walked in and looked around the room and then back at him. “Ye told me my horse needed work and I’m here so ye ready?” Jaime was speechless at her rude behavior. It came with the territory of the rich and spoiled. He had the discussion about respecting his closed office door and it obviously had a great imprecision on her. As usual, he ignored it and told her to warm up while he finished his meeting. She looked ready to have a fit so he returned to his meeting.

When he walked his guests out and they had to step around Laoghaire’s horse, still in the cross ties. Jaime pulled the saddle off the gelding and led him back to his stall. He put the tack back where it belonged and looked outside for her car. He did not see it and felt his anger bubbling over. “Laoghaire, I put ye horse away. Yer not riding in the show this weekend because yer not ready. Sorry if this hurts ye. He clicked off and walked in circles trying to cool off his temper. At one point he looked up and thought he saw Dr. Beauchamp. The woman turned around and he was sure it was her. What the hell was she doin up there?

Rupert had reported that Claire insisted she rented two side by side stalls with half doors to the
Jaime checked her reservation and she was right so he did some shuffling and Fred and Ginger were led to their new stalls, complete with twelve inches of new wood chips that smelled like pine when walked through. He made a comment to Rupert about the extra six inches of chips in the Beauchamp stalls and watched his friend blush. “Rupert, are ye sweet on the lass?” Rupert rolled his eyes and made a comment about the Brits in Boston and mumbled the rest while walking away. She was beautiful, and mysterious, with a sweet plump ass. Who wouldn’t be interested he thought.

Claire moved into her new home and sat in front of the window for three days just looking at the mountain. On the third afternoon, she walked down to the barn to give the horses some exercise. She pulled the saddles and bridles out of her trailer and started brushing Fred. He curled his head and bumped her lightly into his side. Claire giggled and told him he was very forward and to mind his manners. Little movements to either aid the rider or endear the rider were trained into the therapy horses. Fred knew all the moves. Ginger was leaning on the corral bars watching, and Claire gave her a scratch. Treats after exercise you guys and she led Fred out to the arena.

Claire was a natural born rider with the gift of understanding how to motivate a horse. She had perfect timing and seemed to anticipate problems and prepare to deal with them. Fred was the larger of her horses standing at sixteen hands. He was muscular and willing, if Claire was on him, so she gave in to her passion and pushed him over several jumps. She was laughing at the thrill and patting Fred to show praise. She let him pull the reins and stretch his neck. An hour later she was putting Ginger up and passing out carrots. Kisses goodnight she walked out of the barn.

“Dr. Beauchamp, nice to see ye again.” Jaime’s smile was bright but his eyes took her breath away. What a handsome man she thought. She smiled back as she walked down the driveway back to her house. She was a little startled at how pitch black it was and she could not even see the road up to her house. She realized it was impossible and turned around to walk back. Jaime called to her, “are ye alright Dr. Beauchamp?” She looked up at Jaime tossing hay bails from the loft and got stuck on his heaving chest and bulging biceps. She looked a second too long and stammered to recover herself. “Please Mr. Fraser, call me Claire.” He smiled, “I’m Jaime and you are a Sassenach. It means outsider, usually British outsider.” She nodded her head at the reference remembering the age-old tension and wars between the Brits and the Scots. “Well, I apologize for imposing on you again Jamie but it seems I’ve lost my road home in the dark. May I borrow a flashlight until tomorrow?”

Jaime jumped the ten feet to the ground surprising Claire. “Of course ye can, I’ll get one for ye.” He came back with a powerful looking flashlight, “ready Sassenach?” Claire was stumped by his question. “Ah, the flashlight comes with the owner, that’s me. Ready?” She had to jog to catch up with him and protested his escort assuring him she could make it home on her own. “Well, if ye got carried off by coyotes, I’d never forgive myself. Besides, a walk into the desert at this time of year is a treat. Do ye smell the Creosote?” Jaime breathed deep and smiled, “I love that smell.” Claire just smiled at his indulgence and was very relieved for the escort. She had no idea how dark her neighborhood was and she felt a bit apprehensive about her decision to land here.

They walked slowly and Jaime entertained her with facts about the desert and how different it was the highlands of Scotland. She listened to his voice because she could barely see the outline of him walking right next to her. Every now and then their hands would bump sending a thrill up her spine. Jaime held the light on the road and finally admitted he saw no road or house. She pulled the flashlight to the right and found it. Jaime felt a shock when her hand covered his to pull the light. He was a bit ruffled by her contact and didn’t know why. They continued up to her house and looked for the driveway for five minutes before finding it. Claire’s fear grew. How would she feel safe out in in the absolute darkness? They pushed on until she guessed she was close to the house. Again she grabbed his hand and pushed the light to illuminate the structure right in front of them. “Wow, I’ve never seen a night so dark Mr., um Jaime.” It’s a little scary to be honest.” He nudged her toward the house. Aye lass, this something ye get used to after livin in a city for a long time.” Go ahead and
open the door, turn yer lights on, it will make ye feel better.”

Claire had quite a time finding the lock for the front door until Jaime came up behind her and lit her view. “Sorry, my first time finding the lock, actually.” The door pushed open and she ran her hand along the wall looking for light switches. “Sorry again, could you shine the light so I can find the switches. She was feeling helpless. A decidedly hateful feeling to have. “Of course Sassenach, I’m sorry.” Jaime ran the light to the switches and held it there. The truth was, he was staring at her silhouette completely taken by her. Claire pushed the eight switches up and light flooded the outside front and back. She let out a relieved breath. “Now that I’m here could ye show me around this place.” It was a ruse to make her feel better, after checking each room for shadows that mean to harm her she would feel better he thought. He could hear it her voice she was scared.

Jaime loved the house. The clean lines and modern architecture was his favorite. They walked into the bedroom and she saw the bright lights on the pool right outside her bedroom door. “Oh, there’s the pool!” Jaime flipped the lock and walked outside to a beautiful back yard complete with pool, outdoor kitchen, barbecue, and large patio. “Verra nice, he said nodding. “And ye can see yer horse from the road! Are ye always lucky like this?” Claire shot him a look, “certainly not.”

She bid farewell to Jaime and watched the flashlight beam bounce as he walked down the hill. She could not look away until it disappeared. She locked every door and settled on the couch to watch television. She tried to concentrate on the program but her mind kept returning to Jaime Fraser, a man who captivated her mind tonight. I’m just lonely she thought.

Claire was up as the dawn was peaking on the horizon. She was restless all night and finally gave in and got up. She poured coffee in her thermos and left for an early morning ride. When she rounded the hill she saw a huge black horse and rider. The rider was Jaime so she stayed behind the bushes to watch him. He had total control of the big horse and he circled at one end and pushed the horse into the bit. By the time Claire realized what he was doing the horse leaped into the air and easily cleared a five-foot jump. “Oh my God” she whispered. That was impressive, and Jaime Fraser was becoming very interesting. Where did he learn to jump like that she wondered? She continued down the hill, excited to enjoy the beautiful day.

Claire took Fred into the foothills to look at the gorgeous scenery. The desert was in full bloom from recent rain and it took her breath away. She had a closer look at the Goldfield mountains and hoped she could hike through them someday. When she led Fred into the barn she heard shouting coming from Jaime’s office and pretended not to notice. Seeing Angus she smiled and said hello. He was in full riding gear and she wondered what his role was at the center. “Angus, what do you do here?” Angus was very happy to walk with her and explain his role as the eventing trainer. “Jaime is hired by owners to train their horses for jumping, dressage, or eventing. He also buys green horses and we train them, show them, and sell them. I train the green horses.”

“Do you show them as well?” Claire was fascinated. “No lass, I’m not pretty enough. Jaime’s girlfriend does the showin for all three classes. That may not last much longer,” he said conspiratorially. “The lass hasn’t been puttin the time in like she used to and Jaime’s about fed up.” Jaime’s girlfriend I thought. Time to stop thinking about that one coming around. She was more disappointed than she should have been. “It was lovely talking to you Angus. See ya.” Claire fussed over her horses and walked back to her house.

Claire was a planner. After leaving Boston, she gave herself one month to settle in and make arrangements for the horses to begin equine therapy. She was on day four and already bored. She grabbed a book and stretched out on a lounge in the back yard. The sun felt so good on her legs and face and she felt her eyelids drooping. The book fell to the astroturf and she slept peacefully.
Jaime was at the end of his rope with Laoghaire. She demanded she show this weekend claiming that was her job here. Jaime knew she wasn’t putting in the effort anymore and she wasn’t ready for the three prize horses he had for sale at the moment. His frustration was over the top. He had to turn these horses quickly to stay above water. She had changed so much in the past few months and he couldn’t figure it out. Gone was his little energizer bunny who lived to ride. She would crawl into his bed a few times per week and stay in his bed when he left for work. He was tired of fighting with her and took the easy way out by not engaging. He had to find an alternative to show the horses.

Jaime had Angus dress out for show today so he could assess how he looked when pretending he gave a crap about this end of the process. The judges looked for the best team between horse and rider and Angus was too much of a bully. It was Angus’s job to lay the foundation training in dressage and jumping, the hardest part of the process. He was very good at it but lacked the finesse required in the arena. He watched and scratched his head in frustration. They were in for a disappointing weekend.
Chapter 3

The center was a bustle of activity on show day. Claire exercised Fred and Ginger and watched from the arena. Jaime loaded four horses and seemed on edge. Claire walked Ginger to her stall and saw an animated Jaime pleading with someone on the phone. He clicked off looking crushed. “Hi Jaime, anything I can do to help?” Jaime’s smile started before his head came up. He looked at her for a few seconds too long, “well, not unless you can braid like a groom.” Claire smiled. “I can actually, and I’m rather good at it. I also happen to be bored and free today. So ask me.” Jaime’s eyebrows shot up. “Would you please come with us and save my ass today?” Claire looked in his eyes, “of course.”

Jaime pulled everything together and called to Claire to ride with him. Some time alone with this mystery woman was exactly what he wanted. They talked non-stop about what brought Claire to Arizona, and how Jaime got here from Scotland. He learned she was a plastic surgeon specialized in burn repair and hoped to use Fred and Ginger in equine therapy for her patients and others if interest grew. Jaime told her about buying green horses and turning them into champions and his other training projects. Jaime was almost sad to see the show grounds ahead. He wanted to have her all to himself for the next several hours, or days.

They had stopped for rubber bands, hoof oil, body spray, tack oil, and a big bucket to put it all in. Claire carried the bucket and came back to assist Jaime with unloading the horses. It took nerves of steel to trailer green horses. When Claire walked up the ramp, rope in hand, Jaime called for her to wait for him. She attached the rope and slowly nudged the horse to take a step back. “Good boy!” She rubbed his neck, “that wasn’t so bad, was it?” She placed her palm on the horse’s chest and pushed while walking beside the horse. He watched her in fear but she kept nudging and coo’ing to him until he took long steps backward and landed in the grass. “Aren’t you the best boy!” Claire let him eat grass until Rupert came for him. “That took guts lass. This one almost killed Jaime last month buggerin in the trailer. Do they call that beginner’s luck?” He laughed and Claire bristled. “Not a beginner Rupert.”

Claire was in heaven with all the activity. She spent eight years on the show circuit and missed every element of it. Her braids were perfect and horse and tack looked amazing. She was standing on a mounting block mid-way through the last horse. Jaime noticed the looks she was getting from passersby and wondered if she had any idea how she was admired. That included Angus and Rupert who hung on her every word. Claire was trying to still the horse who suddenly wanted to toss his head and ruin her row. “Hey buddy, you got a bee in your bonnet?” She jumped down and saw a very pretty blonde waving her crop at the horses face and smiling.

“Excuse me, while I can’t think of a single reason why you would want to upset the horse at this moment I’ll ask you to move along please.” She was in show clothes and continued waving the crop. “Stop that!” Claire was about to lose it. “I’m Laoghaire, and you are?” Claire looked at her with instant boobs dislike. “My name is Claire, please move along.” So this idiot is Jaime’s girlfriend. He likes big boobs I see. I don’t suppose my C cups are going to impress him much. “Where’s Jaime and who are you?” Jaime called Laoghaire and she turned and walked away. He spoke to her without a smile. In fact, he looked irritated with her. Claire wondered if that is who he argued with yesterday.

As the horses came back Claire would fix them up again and off they would go. She watched Angus in the dressage section and stadium jumping. He was commanding and scored well but did not get close to five better riders. The horse could have done better she thought to herself. Laoghaire was picture perfect in dressage but the horse was sloppy and uncollected in both jumping rounds. The center did mediocre overall, and Jaime was packing up to go. Claire could see Laoghaire arguing with him about something and Jaime just shook his head no. To Claire, it looked she might throw
herself on the ground stomping her feet and fists. Finally, she left, red-faced.

Claire and Jaime loaded the horses without much talk. He was inside his head and she was exhausted. The drive home felt more intimate with less talk and just being together. Jaime offered to drop Claire at home but she chose to stay and help unload the horses. It was still light enough to see her road when they were done so she waved and walked home. She sat on her couch and decided her life was too empty. When she left the frenetic pace of Boston she wanted peace and quiet to ponder her life and build strength from within. At least that is what her latest self-help book said. She headed for the shower and later settled in with her new encyclopedia of desert plants.

Jaime stepped out of his shower with steam rising from his skin. It was a long day and he was tired. He could not understand his mood lately. He never seemed to feel happy anymore and didn’t know why. He fell into bed and reached for a book but he was asleep before the second page was turned.

Anytime Claire was awake with the dawn she would watch Jaime in the arena. She wondered why he chose to ride so early in the morning. She watched him take a five-foot jump and she froze. The girth snapped in mid-air and dropped Jaime into the fence with poles and standards crashing to the ground. “Jesus H Christ!” Claire ran for her keys and jumped in the truck. She might need it for a trip to the hospital. “Jaime!” She pulled wood and poles away and found him on his back. Knowing not to move him until he regained consciousness she felt his pulse and placed her cool hands on his cheeks and forehead. “Jaime?”

When his beautiful eyes opened she let out a breath and smiled at him. “How do you feel?” Jaime moved his hands and legs a bit. “Not too good Sassenach.” She was concerned by a slur in his words. She ran him through the usual, follow my finger, what year is this, and what’s your name. “I think a trip to ER is a good idea Jaime.” He rolled to his side and tried to stand with effort. “You are the prettiest lass I’ve ever seen Sassenach.” She got under his arm to assist him, “really, well you need to get out more.” His arm around her shoulder and his hand holding her arm his zig-zag walking convinced Claire to get her medical bag. “Sit on this hay while I get your golf cart. You are going home and I will examine your head.”

Once Jaime was sitting on his couch, Claire raced home to grab her bag. She let herself into his house and yelled his name, scaring him awake. “I’m sorry Jaime, you cannot fall asleep. You may have a concussion.” She checked him over and happily reported he had no serious injury but needed to be watched for the next eight hours. “Can I sleep mo gradhag, my eyes want to close.” Would you be more comfortable upstairs? I will check on you throughout the day but I need to tend your horse.”

With a groan, Jaime stood up and started to lean to one side. Claire slid under his arm again, “let me help you.” She got him upstairs and pulled his boots off. He was asleep before she pulled the quilt over him.

Claire jumped out of the golf cart and walked toward the huge black horse. He was obviously shaken up and backed up at her approach. She walked right by him like he wasn’t even there. She inspected the saddle that still lay under the pile of rubble. “Look at that.” She heard a horse sniffing behind her and smiled. “Not your fault big guy.” She stood and walked forward reaching her hand behind her to grab the reins. The horse followed and Claire carried the saddle. She walked the horse into the barn and found Rupert in Jaime’s office. “Pardon me, do you know where this big black horse goes, Jaime’s horse?” Rupert’s eyes were like saucers, “Ye dinna have Donus do ye lass?” He looked out the door, “Christ! Ye do. He is mid-way down on the left, names Donus.” Rupert watched Claire walk the horse and pull off his bridal closing the stall door behind her. She walked back to Rupert and handed him the tack pointing to the busted saddle against the wall. “Jaime is home for the day, took a bad spill when his girth broke.”
Claire ran up the stairs and into Jaime’s room. He was still out. She touched his forehead and cheeks and his hand came up to grab hers. “Sassenach.” She lifted his eyelids for pupil response. “Do you have any nausea Jaime?” He shook his head no and sat up. “But I do have a crushing headache.”

Swinging his feet to the floor he stood up “Better get back to work.” She stood in front of him. “That is not a great idea actually. You need to rest today, doctor’s orders.” He shook his head painfully. “I canna Claire, look there’s Rupert walkin this way now. My doorbell will not stop ringin today so I might as well work.” Claire looked out the wall of glass and saw Angus start his own journey over the lawn. “What if I sneak you out and hide you at my house today?” His smile was brilliant. “I will bring my truck around to the drive and wait for them to leave. You come out and jump in.”

Claire answered the ringing doorbell and laughed at the startled looks on Angus and Rupert. “What the hell is she doin here?” Settle down Angus, she’s a doctor, I fell on big bertha, then bertha fell on me. She was the first one there and gave me an exam, I’m fine.” Rupert whistled, “Bertha is a mess, ye hit it hard laddie.” Jaime felt his eyes closing again. The guys made excuses to get back to work and were gone.

Claire waited in the truck and after five minutes came in to find Jaime sound asleep on the couch. She smiled down at him, such a gorgeous man. And such a nasty girlfriend. She found enough in the kitchen to make a pot of chili and a salad. Cleaned up the dishes and left. On the way up the hill, she thought she saw a small animal dart into the bushes. She slowed down but did not see anything.

She checked Jaime two more times that day, once he was still sleeping, the next time he was eating chili watching a documentary in the downstairs study. “Lassie, come here and look at this Orca.” Claire walked in smiling. She looked at the lovely studded leather couches, impressive twenty-foot high bookshelves, and modern computer station. Jaime stood up and kissed her cheek. “Yer my savior today lass. I forgot how much I love home cooking. I heard ya weaved a spell on Donus to get him in a stall. That wee devil usually won’t let anyone touch him.” He was looking at her strangely. “Thank ye Sassenach, for everything today.”

Claire was about to respond when the front door opened to crash into the wall behind it. “Jaime? Jaime where are ye?” Jaime let out a long breath. “In the study Laoghaire.” She came bounding in and almost ran into Claire. “What’s this then, what is she doin here?” Claire smiled, “just leaving.” She could not imagine what Jaime was doing with that woman.

As soon as Claire left the room, Jaime missed her. Dealing with the spoiled Laoghaire was getting old and he just wanted her to go away. “Laoghaire, it’s time for us to stop this. whatever it is. I can’t do it anymore and I want you to go. I’m sorry if this hurts ye, if anything can hurt ye.” Her eyes were wide and her cheeks were tomato red. “Why, have ye picked up with that one now?” Jaime shook his head. “No, she’s a doctor, and a friend, who happened to see me fall. Ye and I have argued non-stop for two months. My heart isna in it anymore. If ye still want to show for me that’s fine but after last weekend ye got to get more invested, more time on the horse.”

Laoghaire stood like a statue glaring at him, eyes wide and flaming cheeks. Her chest was heaving and it was obvious this is the last thing she expected. “Laoghaire, I am sorry. Ye have a life different than mine, we have nothin in common lass. I don’t want to hurt ye but yer attitude is not somethin I want to live with. Let’s stay friends, keep yer rent discount, and show for me.” His eyes were pleading with her. She spun without a word and walked out. Jaime waited for a slamming door but instead, he heard dishes clashing and flatware hitting the floor. The microwave. Is she eating?

Laoghaire stayed in the kitchen for twenty minutes, eating chili and staring out the window. She couldn’t lose Jaime. He gave her credibility, pushed her up on the social scale, and she basked in the envy of her friends. She had it all and was not inclined to let it go. She would drag her father into this and he will force Jaime to stay in the relationship. She felt much better, picked up her purse and left,
using Jaime’s golf cart to get back to her truck. The fact that Jaime was injured and should have use of the golf cart did not occur to her.

Jaime felt a huge weight lift off his shoulder’s, a monumental relief it was over. He didn’t care if Laoghaire wanted to show his horses. He would put her on his least desirable to keep the peace.

Claire came by Jaime’s once more in the early evening and found him going over ledgers. She had her doctor bag and quickly took his vitals. She turned his hand palm up on her knee to count his pulse and enjoyed the contact more than she cared to admit. Okay my friend, you get the all clear. See ya around. She put all her equipment away and headed for the door. Jaime thanked her, wanted to beg her to stay, but wished her well instead. Every step out to the car made her miss him more. She decided to put some distance between them and get her head on straight.

Laoghaire stepped in front of Claire and she almost ran into her. Stopping abruptly, she looked down at the girl. “What are ye doin here?” Claire didn’t hesitate, “leaving please get out of my way.”

Laoghaire stepped in front of her every move, something Claire found extremely aggressive and she was getting mad. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Move, and go check on your boyfriend, he got injured today remember?” Laoghaire stepped aside and started pulling her shirt and pants off until she was naked. Claire looked around to see if there were witnesses to this bizarre behavior. Clothes left in the driveway she walked into the house. Claire sat in her truck and shook her head. That girl was not right in the head.

“What did ye forget Sassenach?” Jaime called from his ledgers. “That’s right, she’s an outsider and I dinna want to see her with ye again.” Jaime’s head snapped up to see Laoghaire posing into the door frame. Jaime was silent, he walked toward her and asked where her clothes were. He walked her out the front door and went back inside locking the door behind him. She was shrieking at him to let her in, screaming that he couldn’t do this to her, and she would tell her father about this. Jaime turned all the lights out and went to bed. Leaving her outside in the dark. Now he was mad and the lassie was on her last leg in his barn.

Claire stayed away from the barn for the next three days. She decided to update the guest bathroom and lost herself in the project. For three days she put on her sweats and pulled cabinets, scraped wallpaper and measured the walls for mirrors and hardware. This project was therapeutic and she didn’t mind the hard work. Her house was covered in drywall dust and the cabinets were piled in the hall. She was sweeping up the debris when she heard the doorbell. Jaime lost himself when she opened the door. She was so casual, and sweaty, and braless. He swallowed, “ah, Sassenach, ah, lass,” he tore his eyes off her and looked toward something behind him, anything, as long as it wasn’t her.

Claire looked at Jaime and the butterflies took flight in her stomach. She smiled. “Jaime! So nice to see you. Perfect timing, c’mon.” She pulled him into the house by his hand and shut the door. Jaime was thrilled and let her lead. His eyes slid down to her ass until she turned suddenly and said “look.” Jaime’s head snapped up and his cheeks blushed fiercely. He looked from the destroyed bathroom and back at her, then decided not to look at her anymore. She was making him feel weird in those clothes. Sweats pushed up to mid-calf, a muscle shirt tied at the waist showing an inch of stomach skin, and no bra. Clearly, he would not survive this visit and it was time to leave. Why would she pull her hair up into a ponytail for Christ sake? It makes her eyes stand out and now he can’t breathe. “Did someone break in and destroy yer bathroom Sassenach?” He gave her a half smile. “No, goofball, I need help carrying these cabinets outside to the curb. I’ll call the city for a pickup.” Jaime noticed the twenty or so magazines strewn all over the couch and floor. He could see her sitting on the floor, back against the couch, playing with her hair while she flipped the pages.

“No problem, I can get them.” He grabbed the large cabinet and heaved it into his arms. “If ye could
open the door lass?” Jaime carried everything out to the curb and was breathing heavy when he walked back in. Claire handed him a lemon aide and got stuck looking at his chest and arms. Jaime thanked her. Claire looked up at his face, “what?” Jaime chuckled, “what is next Sassenach?” She crossed to the couch and opened several magazines to dog-eared pages, “what about this?” He looked at three distinctly different styles of cabinets and hardware and suggested they take a ride. Claire was excited about the company and another opinion and jogged to her room to change. Jaime wished he was in front of her to watch her breasts bounce. “Ready!” She was respectfully dressed but he had an image in his mind now.

They went to three remodel showrooms and Claire asked all the right questions while Jaime looked at her round ass when he got the chance. Cabinets and hardware ordered she asked if Jaime could run her by Home Depot to look at paint. She wasn’t usually so imposing but she was crushing on him and didn’t want it to end. Jaime jumped at the chance hoping Rupert would handle his three o’clock meeting with the pony club. Claire chose wall and accent colors and grabbed all the rollers, drop cloths, mixers, and an edger, dropped them all into a bucket and paid the man. She was excited and Jaime noticed the rose blush on her cheeks and wanted to touch them. Christ, get yer head straight or take her home and leave the lass alone. She is in a class that’s off limits to you ye daft idiot. They loaded everything into the back of Jaime’s truck and headed for home. “Let’s eat!” Jaime wanted more time with her, instantly forgetting his mental resolve from five minutes ago. She smiled, “great!”

They sat on the patio of a local steak house watching the most amazing sunset of brilliant orange, blue, and purple. She could not take her eyes off the mountain and glorious sky above. Jaime decided the view was extraordinary and it had nothing to do with the sky. Two beers each and thick juicy hamburgers made Claire even happier. “This was my best day in Arizona Jaime, so thank you.” Jaime opened her door, “well, yer easy to please Sassenach.”

Claire tried to read before bed but her mind was stuck on the bathroom renovation. She finally got up and stood in the little room. “Yep, the floor needs to come up.” She opened her laptop to research pulling up tile floors.
Chapter 4

Claire was on her way to get Fred tacked up when she passed Jaime, Rupert, Angus, and another man at the door of the indoor arena. They were watching Laoghaire ride a large bay gelding. Jaime was asking her for gates that she couldn’t get from the horse. When she tried to jump him, he buggered to the right. Jaime was getting frustrated with her. She rode up to them, dismounted, and walked to her car, spinning rocks as she left. Rupert whistled low, “looks like the lassie just quit ye boss.” Jaime could hardly contain his anger and apologized to the man.

Claire approached and asked if she could help. Four men looked at her like she was speaking Greek. “Well, you look like you could use a rider and I am free at the moment.” She mounted the horse. Rupert was protesting that she could get hurt. Angus just stared at her. Jaime looked up at her, “have ye ridden dressage lass? What about jumpin?” Something about the way she approached the horse and mounted told Jaime she had done this before. Claire nodded her head and moved the horse forward and a fast collected walk, happy the gelding gave her time to set his head and feel his rhythm. Halfway around she moved him to a trot, then canter, trot canter. She rode into the middle of the arena nose pointed at the men and made the horse pickup alternating feet by applying pressure with her lower leg. Sidestepping toward the rail she signaled a canter, then pushed the horse into the bit and sailed over six jumps between 2.’6” and 3’6”. She let the horse walk and stretch his neck. When she next looked at the men, every mouth was open. Jaime gave her the biggest smile she had seen and nodded his head.

Jaime and the man left to negotiate and Angus walked into the center of the arena. Hey lass, can ya give me an extended trot. “How? There is too much stuff in the way. Angus whistled at Rupert and asked him to help move some jumps. The men pushed them all to one side. Claire pushed the gelding into a trot and cut lengthwise across the arena. She sat back in the classical dressage seat and pushed the horse into an extended trot, front legs extending straight in front. “I will be damned whispered Angus. Did ye know she could ride like that?” Rupert couldn’t speak but he shook his head side to side. Claire jumped down and left the horse with Angus. Both men stared at her like she was a superhero. She laughed. That was the most fun she’s had on a horse in a year, when she retired from showing.

Claire gave carrots to Fred and Ginger and headed for the driveway. She heard Jaime run up behind her. His eyes were huge as was his smile. He grabbed her arm and spun her around picking her up off her feet to swing her around. “Sassenach, why didn’t ye tell me ye could ride like that?” Claire was laughing, “it wouldn’t make any difference and I guess it never came up. It was so fun! It’s been a year and I really missed it.” Jaime was deep in thought and just looked in her eyes. “Come, I’ll walk ye home and talk a bit. Maybe I can bounce an idea past ye for yer honest opinion, aye?” Claire was trying to think fast if she wanted to go back to the show. She knew what he wanted to ask her.

He talked as they walked. Once home she handed him a beer and sat opposite him. He offered her a percentage of the sale price of the green horses and would pay her a flat fee for showing client horses. “I’m tryin to stay calm here lass. I need a rider with yer skills, ye ken? I dinna want to push ye so I’m leavin so ye can think on it. He finished his beer. “Whenever ye want to talk about it just come and find me lass.” He was deep in his head seeing how this would complete his team, he reached for her beer and drank it down. Then he walked out the door with an incredulous smile like he just saw an angel.

Claire considered his offer while she chipped away at ceramic tiles. She really was surprised how much fun she had, how much she missed that level of riding. It was the first thing she quit when her world fell apart in Boston. Now she realized it was the only thing she should have kept. She made a
mental list of what she needed to show. She was so happy she kept her Daner boots because it took almost three months for them to make her pair and she didn’t have time to wait for new ones. She would find a riding shop tomorrow and put her habit together.

At one o’clock in the morning, she fell into bed and thought about Jaime. His body, his lips, his laugh. She slept with a smile on her face. Outside, two intruders walked the perimeter of her property, sizing up entry points and places to ambush their prey. They turned toward the road and were shocked by a dog who came out of nowhere barking loudly. He took a chunk out of a thigh and ran his teeth down the arm of the other. Lights went on in the house and the two ran for there car kicking at the dog. Standing in the road the dog continued to bark until the car was out of sight.

Claire was scared. She heard the dog barking, heard two voices getting attacked by the sound of it, and heard the car start and screech down the road. She called 911 and the dispatcher kept her on the phone until the cruiser got there. She let two officers in and explained what happened. She heard rapid knocking on the door and Jaime burst into the house. “Sassenach, what’s amiss? I saw the police lights and ran up here.” He was holding her hands and breathing hard. Claire told him what happened as the police were coming back from checking the back yard. They reported seeing the tracks from tires in the dirt road but no dog. They seemed relieved to see Jaime with her. She found that unsettling.

Claire thanked them and walked them to the door saying goodbye. They promised to cruise the neighborhood for the next week. Then they left. While Claire stood at the door Jaime looked at her flared lounging pants riding low on her hips and the t-shirt that came just to the top of the pants. When she walked he could see about an inch of her flat stomach. Her hair kept falling in her face and she would comb it back with her fingers making the shirt rise higher. He was hypnotized until he heard the door close. He snapped his head up.

“Do ye have whiskey Sassenach?” Jaime brought two glasses and a bottle and sat with her on the couch. He knew she was scared to death and poured her a double. He noticed it was a very good whiskey. “This will calm yer nerves lass. I’m sleepin on the couch tonight because I can see yer still a bit rattled.” She let out a breath with overwhelming relief. “Thank you Jaime, but I don’t want to impose. Well, maybe I do.” He could see her shaking and rubbed her arms. “Dinna worry lass, it’s my turn on your couch.” He smiled at her and handed her the glass.

“So you have some energy left to talk about that horse I rode today?” Claire asked hopeful for more time to settle down. He smiled, “Always.” They talked for two hours about the green horses he buys to train and sell, and the client horses he takes to train. Both are a good business when I have a complete team. Lose the rider and nothin sells. I’m two weeks late selling the horses we showed last weekend. Dinna get a single offer so far. I won’t buy any more until these sell, ye ken? Angus keeps them sharp but he should be startin a new group now. We lose money every week these horses are still here.”

Claire decided to jump in and ask the personal questions she’s been dying to ask. “What about Laoghaire? Isn’t she your rider?” Jaime ran his fingers through his hair. “She has been for the past six months. Did well in the beginning but lately, she’s no interested in working the horses, just wants to show. Ye saw her dismal ride last weekend. She and I used to date ye know.” Claire sat up, “used to?” She felt her anger suddenly and was shocked Jaime would lie to her right now. “If you think I’m going to sleep with you tonight your dead wrong!” Jaime’s head snapped up. “What?”

Claire stood up to pace, shaking her head at Jaime’s behavior. I guess I was wrong about you being honest and decent! I can’t believe it because I’m usually a good judge of character. Sorry Mr. Fraser, you can leave.” She went into the kitchen before the tears came. Standing at the sink she looked outside, waiting for the front door to close.
“I’ll ask ye to talk to me about what just happened lass.” Jaime’s voice was just above a whisper. He was confused and suddenly scared she might leave his world because of a misconception. He was desperate to talk this out. “Claire, please talk with me.”

Claire turned around and told him she saw Laoghaire strip naked and walk into his house today after her confrontation and aggressive posturing in the driveway. She also told him about the waving the crop to scare the horse at the show. Jaime was incredulous and it took him a full minute to respond. The kitchen was dark and felt safe to Claire. She brought the whiskey and glasses in and set them on the bar. She sat next to Jaime and waited to hear him out. When he was done she took his hand. “I can hear your truth Jaime. Sorry it’s been a struggle for you and I don’t envy you having to deal with her. I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions, and I’m a bit embarrassed. I know guys like you don’t look at girls like me.” The last sentence was so quietly said he almost didn’t hear her. He was stunned by it.

Before he could respond she said goodnight and closed her bedroom door. Jaime pored another whiskey and sat in the dark thinking about this amazing woman. He thought he was falling in love with her and hadn’t even kissed her yet. She was so easy to be around, like they were old friends that he wanted to touch and kiss and…. “God, what have I done?” He turned off the lights outside and laid down on the couch. It took a while to replay her words fifty times but he finally fell asleep.

It took Claire just as long to let go of the conversation they just had. She was over the moon he had dumped that spoiled brat. So relieved he hadn’t been trying to manipulate her for sex. She felt the start of her excitement over the prospect of showing for him. It would keep her near him almost every day and right now that was enough. As she drifted off she heard a dog bark far away.

When Claire woke up Jaime was gone and left a note,

Good Morning Sassenach,
I hope the day is kind to ye. I dinna want to push ye lass, but will ye ride for me this weekend? Please? It’s a two-day show in New Mexico, buyers are comin. Important.
JMF

“Yes I will Mr. Fraser,” she said out loud. She had shopping to do and jumped in the shower. Pulling out of her driveway she saw something dart away out of the corner of her eye. She couldn’t tell what kind of animal and it wasn’t coming back. She went on with her day.

Claire found a Shepler’s in Mesa and bought taupe, white, and yellow breeches, Ratcatchers in five colors and fabrics, and a very well cut black jacket that fit tight like it was custom. She purchased a velvet helmet, three pairs of leather gloves, a new crop, and spurs. Last, she picked out a pin worn at the neck of her ratcatcher. It was plain but it would do. She stopped in a salon and paid for some pampering. A hair cut and facial, eyebrows and toenails. At five o’clock she pulled into her driveway and unloaded her packages. She was so excited about her new habit she didn’t even notice the bathroom still in shreds. She hung everything up and pulled out her boots to get them cleaned up and shiny. She held one close and ran her fingers over the dirt and dust from her last show. A packed stadium, and her final salute to the judge before riding a perfect circuit. She won her class and praise from the owner of the horse. She remembered saying goodbye and holding her tears back until she reached her car and then sobbed all the way home. She was on top at long last. All the years of training and riding and loving this sport. And she was walking away.

She heard the doorbell and dropped the boot. She saw the red mop of curls and opened the door smiling. “Yes, I will absolutely ride for you this weekend!” Jaime’s head came up and he gazed at her eyes. “Sassenach, just flash those gorgeous eyes at the judge and don’t fall off. That’s all and ye’ll win.” She made a face at him. “Is there time for me to work with Angus the next two days? I think it best if he can coach me on each of them.” She looked up at Jaime with eyes shining and a very happy smile. It lifted his heart and confused him. It was like she was thanking him for the
opportunity rather than saying your welcome for bailing him out. Either way, it would work and Angus was ready to give her both afternoons.

Claire ran for her purse, c’mon and she ran out the door leaving Jaime standing in her living room. He followed and jumped into her truck. “Do you have time to catch some dinner? I have been shopping and having girl stuff done all day. I am famished. If not I can drop you. Jaime looked at her and chuckled, “where we goin Sassenach?” She pulled out, “To eat hamburgers and look at the mountain of course. Then a bushel of carrots for my guys.” She looked at him so full of excitement and Jaime’s heart melted.

She made him happy, and excited, and positive, for the first time in so long. Her enthusiasm about showing was like how he used to be. She brought back that feeling and it was wonderful. “Sassenach, can I ask about your ridin history? It was damn surprising to see ye ride the other day. I had no idea. Now I want to know everything if ye please.” She explained her two loves, horses and medicine, giving a quick overview of training and showing from age eleven until last year when she retired from showing. “Most riders dinna quit when they’re on top like ye were. It doesna make sense to work that hard for all those years and then quit. Was it yer doctorin that suffered?” Jaime was pushing her and did not realize it because he was drowning in her eyes and staring at her mouth. Claire was silent and he snapped out of his head. “It’s a long story, very boring, and not worth the time to tell it.” I want to focus on what’s ahead and a second chance to ride and show. Fred and Ginger will kill me for being late with treats, ready?” Just like that, she refused him and still made him happy while doing it.

They walked into the barn with two bushels of carrots. Fred saw her and kicked at his bars. She was hugged by both horses as she gushed over them. “Why do they do that Sassenach?” She laughed, “it’s part of their training to either assist the rider or endear the rider. I always feel good after their hugs so it works.”
“Fraser! A word.” The man stood tall and looked commanding. Claire noticed Jaime’s back tighten up and he went to join the man and walked to his office. She heard the door slam and an argument start immediately. She felt cold claws creep up her back and shivered. She headed for home feeling a bit worried for Jamie.

She typically left her truck lights on while she unlocked the front door and flicked up the light switches. She cut the engine just as her door opened from the outside and a large hand grabbed her by the hair. She tried to scream but the man pressed her mouth closed while a second man grabbed her purse. Claire saw him rifle through her purse and thought they only meant to rob her. She thrashed and tried to pull away from the man holding her. “knock it off cunt!” then he hit her on the back of the head and she passed out.

Jaime stood toe to toe with Laoghaire’s father, Dougal McKenzie, whose red face and flashing eyes told him he would move heaven and earth to crush him. Jaime let him yell, insult, and threaten to pull his financing from his business. Jaime wanted him gone, he felt there was something wrong and it was spinning his stomach into knots. “Look Dougal, her daughter has issues. I’m not a therapist ye ken? Ye made that monster, now ye fix her. If ye pull financing, good, I wash my hands of both of ye. We are done here.”

Claire was waking up with a splitting headache and could not focus her eyes. One of the men was on his cell phone asking for her description, the other was trashing her bedroom. He came out with a black lace bodysuit and threw it at her. “I’m gonna untie you and you will get that on in under a minute. Then it’s party time sweet cheeks.” When it registered in Claire’s brain they were going to rape her she started screaming behind her gag and pulling against her restraints. The man on the phone back-handed her so hard her ears were ringing. He grabbed her hair and viciously yanked it back so she was looking up at him. Ya like dick shoved down your throat sweet cheeks? His hand fumbled for his zipper.

Jaime felt alarm bells going off in his stomach and he had to get moving. Something was not locked up, or water was left on, or the mare was foaling, something was happening. He grabbed Dougal by the arm and shoved him toward the parking lot. Once outside he looked up at Claire’s and noticed the outside lights were off. It locked in that something was very wrong. He shoved Dougal toward his car and started running like his life depended on it. What happened Claire, where’s ye lights? Coming to the house he skidded to a stop and swallowed hard at what he saw. Claire being held by the hair and obviously beaten, two men about to rape her. Jesus Christ Claire, I’m comin!

Jaime held a three-foot log found in a firewood pile at the side of the house. He intended to smash one of the back windows to make them come and find him in the dark. The men were arguing about making her change into something giving Jaime a chance to try the doorknob. It was open! The idiots didn’t lock the door. He twisted the knob and crashed his weight into the door bringing the log down on the first head and savagely kicking at the side of the second man’s knee. He brought the log down on the second man who was wailing and holding his knee. The first man was on his feet and held a knife out making Claire scream behind her gag. Jaime looked at where the knife was, looked up at the log held above his head, rolled his eyes and brought it down on the man’s head. Blood gushed from both men while Jaime called 911. He quickly untied a sobbing Claire and pulled her into his arms. He held her close and whispered to her in Gallic.

Claire was shaking so hard he worried she would collapse. He scooped her up and carried her to a seat in the kitchen, away from the sight of her assailants. “Sassenach, yer alright lass, it's over and the
police are comin.” She was hysterical and kept holding the back of her head crying. Jaime felt a large goose egg and cringed. “Jesus Claire!” She was bleeding from the side of her mount so he brought a towel and ice and tried to clean the wound. She wrapped her arms around him and just kept crying and shaking. The police came in and cuffed the two men who had bled large pools and were not responding. They explained to Claire that they would be very brief but she would have to answer some questions before they left. Jaime waved toward the living room and carried Claire to the couch because she would not let him go. A woman entered the house and announced she was a trauma worker with the police department. She sat next to Claire, so close their thighs were touching. More cops entered the house and cleared out the two men. One had woken up and mumbled he would fuckin kill Laoghaire. Jaime heard the name and let it sink in just how psychotic she was. He could barely grasp the truth that she could arrange this crime on an innocent.

Claire finally released Jaime and he shot up to grab the whiskey and pour two glasses. She was cooperative but not much to say. What she did recount made Jaime’s blood boil. If he weren’t so worried about Claire he would find them and finish them. The medics came in and cleared everyone from the room so they could assist Claire. Jaime walked into the kitchen looking like he was about to break. The trauma worker asked him to sit with her. “Please sit, Mr. Fraser.” Jaime took a seat and looked at her.

“Mr. Fraser, I saw the damage you inflicted on those men with a wood log. One looks like he may not make it, the other is so damaged he named a person of interest when they dragged him out. It was fucking courageous to run in here against two of them. But you got them, in spades. You saved your girlfriend. You are experiencing the post episodic rage that sends too many people to jail because they can’t stop punishing the people who might be involved. I am talking to you Mr. Fraser. Jaime looked at the woman, he had murder on his mind and did not want to be bothered with this.

“Mr. Fraser, I heard the man say leroy, he would fucking kill Leroy for this. Who is Leroy? The cops had heard this exchange and stood up, eyes on Jaime. “Mr. Fraser, this is not a vigilante situation. Tell us what you know before the dimwit makes a phone call and this LeRoy splits town. They were both standing in front of him, very intent on making him understand. Jaime dropped his head in his hands. “Her name is Laoghaire McKenzie, she is twenty-eight years old, and lives in the Groves, number 35. She was my rider and short-lived girlfriend. She arranged this attack to appease her twisted rage and sense of entitlement. Her father was at my barn tonight baiting me into a heated argument. I would say he is a person of interest as well. The cops looked at each other, one went into the backyard to call someone on his cell phone.

Claire came running into the kitchen and jumped in Jaime’s lap. He held her close and felt her shake violently. It broke his heart. She buried her face in his neck and sobbed. The trauma lady found a throw and wrapped it around Claire patting her back. She slid a business card over to Jaime and told him Claire would need some help working through the rape attempt. She looked right at Jaime, “you did the best you could tonight Mr. Fraser. You saved her, you beat down her would be rapists, and you turned in the two people that arranged this horrible crime. You and Claire need to heal from this. There is no one but Claire because the police will take care of the others.” She looked with compassion at the two of them, each struggling with trauma. She put her hand on Claire’s head and felt the huge bump. She took the ice pack from Claire’s hand and put it on the bump. Jaime held it there.

Once they all left the house Jaime carried Claire to the couch and wrapped the blanket tighter around her. The police had taken the rope, gag, and tape used by the men to secure Claire. Jaime thought about how close they came to raping this beautiful, fragile, sweet woman and it made him shake with rage. Claire still pressed to his neck, her sobs were only hiccups now. Jaime spoke quietly to her, “let’s get some clothes and stuff ye need for a few days. Yer stayin with me.” He nudged her into her room and asked if she wanted each thing until he had a bag full of her things. He placed shoes in
front of her feet and she slid her feet into them. “Anything else Sassenach?” She nodded no and they left the house where Claire was tortured. He slid her over and climbed behind the wheel. He worried she would not recover from this and go back to Boston where her family surely was. His heart broke.

Claire was in the shower for thirty minutes. Jaime sat in his study with the lights off trying to gain control over his heart and mind. She was so fragile and scared. All he wanted to do is protect and comfort her. He felt like he was losing his mind. He looked up and Claire stood in front of him. She looked concerned for him.

“Jaime, its over. Thanks to you I am alright and those men… aren’t.” You were my hero tonight, very brave, crashing in to save me like that. I will get over this and we will go on with our plans. This changes nothing.” He looked into her eyes and wished he could spare her the truth. “Claire, those men were hired by Laoghaire to hurt you. Her father was here trying to engage me at the same time you were attacked. You were hurt because of me and I’ll never forgive myself for putting you in harm's way.” She spoke right to him, “yes, you will forgive yourself because no sane person would ever conceive of such a heinous crime. I am unmolested, and the best sentence for that crazy bitch is to see you happy and living the life you deserve. The first step toward that is a hot shower and sleep. Can I grab a pillow from your bed? I have my own blanket.” She smiled at him and he was so grateful.

Jaime checked on Claire after his shower and thought she was sleeping. He dropped into bed and turned the light off, praying in Gallic. He was feeling sleep coming for him and he wanted to surrender. He felt his blanket move and Claire slipped into his bed and pressed her back against him. He wrapped himself around her and held her tight. He pushed his nose into her hair and whispered “yer safe in my arms Sassenach, I’ll no let any harm come to ye.” He rubbed her arm a bit and her shaking lessened. He could feel her relax and breathe deeper. He was relieved she could sleep because there was a riot going on inside him. He was shocked to be holding the object of his desire and willed his body to behave for Christ’s sake. It took a while but he finally slept.

When Jaime opened his eyes Claire was still wrapped in his arms, still sleeping. He knew it was hopeless to prevent his erection and panicked at scaring her. He definitely did not want to let her go either. He could forgo his morning ride and the rest of the week if that is what she needed from him. He closed his eyes and breathed her in.

Jaime’s eyes snapped open and he smelled bacon cooking and brewed coffee. He smiled at his stomach growling him awake. She was here, in his kitchen, cooking breakfast. He let himself hope she would recover and stay in Arizona. Even if she never rode a horse again, she needed to stay in his world, somehow.

Jaime came bounding down the stairs and smiled at her. She was plating the eggs and tossed six pieces of bacon on his plate. I took liberties with your food and stove. Hope it’s okay. Jaime nodded his agreement with his mouth stuffed with eggs and bacon. Claire laughed at his enthusiasm and sat down to pick at her food. Jaime pored two coffees for them and brought out the creamer and milk.

“Did ye sleep Sassenach?” Claire smiled, “yes, best night sleep I’ve had in a while. Thank you for letting me crawl in last night.” She was blushing and Jaime felt his heart melt. “Ye’ll do it again tonight mo gradhag, and the next night until ye can feel safe. She looked up at him, “I think I’ll be okay, but still on your couch for tonight. I don’t want to go back there yet.” He kissed her cheek, “it’s a plan then, and ye are a very good cook Sassenach. You rest today and relax.” Claire stopped him from getting up, her eyes were sad. “Jaime, my face can’t be ignored. Maybe I can cover it with make-up for the show but Angus will see it today and I want to ride. What should I tell him?” Her eyes filled tears and Jaime touched her cheek. “Let me handle it Claire. They will feel bad for ye but they won’t ask ye anything. Okay?” She nodded. Jaime hugged her and left to shower. Claire
cleaned up and let the water run to hide her crying.

Claire wanted to show a brave face. She felt so completely alone in the world and this attempt to rape her scared her to her marrow. She couldn’t go back to Boston so she would just have to make her way here. She felt broken and hoped getting on a horse would help her feel stronger. Her mind drifted to Jaime’s strong arms around her in the night. She woke up about every half-hour startled and shaking. His rhythmic breathing and the feel of him around her pulled her back under. She was grateful for him.

Jaime called the lads into his office and closed the door. This would difficult for them to hear.
“What’s happened Jaime, ye never closed the door before.” Rupert was anxious when he looked at his boss. “Ye boys are Highlanders, born and bred. What I have to tell ye will be hard to hear but I need yer help to protect Claire. Both men sat up straight, not knowing what else was to come. Jaime recounted the whole story including his argument with Dougal, Claire’s attack and near rape, and Laoghaire’s hand in it. As the story unfolded both men became agitated, and Jaime could see their barely contained rage. “Now listen, the both of ye, say nothing to Claire. She wants to put this behind her. Protect her at the show, if I’m not with her, one of ye must be right beside her. If Laoghaire shows up, deal with her as ye see fit but know ye will go to jail for touchin her. The men disbanded and Jaime was aching to feel his arms around Claire.

The cop responding to the 911 call contacted Jaime and let him know that Laoghaire and her father were picked up last night and spent the night in jail. The father was released on his own recognizance but the girl is awaiting bail or transport to a jail to await trial. Of the two assailants, one is dead, the other slipped into a coma during transport and has not regained consciousness. Jaime thanked the officer and sat back to ponder this twist. Dougal did not bail Laoghaire out of jail, but left her there to the fate of the courts? Interesting.

Jaime walked over to the arena and heard Angus coaching Claire. She was sailing over the big jumps and her face looked like she was having the time of her life. He felt flushed when she smiled at him. I am in love with ye lass, he thought, what will become of me if ye canna love me back? He sat next to Angus in the center of the arena and watched her adjust her ride to Angus’s suggestions. “Claire will steal the show ridin like this,” Angus said with pride. Jaime noticed that Claire had riding clothes on. She would be spectacular this weekend. He felt the excitement creeping back.

Angus was shouting at her to prepare for a fail. He could see the horse was getting buggy. Claire felt it too and pressed him into the jump, both men held their breath as Claire raised her right arm to the side leaving her disconnected from the horse momentarily, and let him see her crop on the side he would have run to avoid the jump. The horse lurched forward to avoid the crop and Claire was flawless as she gathered him together after a perfect landing. Rupert whistled from the side door.
“That was impressive. Let’s see if ye taught him a lesson.” Jaime looked at her face and she was breathing heavy but her eyes were shining brightly.

“Nice work lass,” Angus was smiling at her. Get the next one Rupert! This continued all afternoon. By the fourth mount, Claire was getting tired. Jaime walked into the arena and motioned her over. When she stopped next to him he pulled her off the horse and handed the reigns to Angus. He walked Claire out of the arena.
Claire barely got out of the arena before she jumped into Jaime’s arms and let out a whoop! Then she grabbed her head and bent over. Jaime went from super happy to scared shitless. “Claire! What’s happened to ye?”

Claire stood up and her face was pale. She pulled off her helmet and cupped the back of her head. “Sorry, that helmet presses on my bump and I got dizzy, it’s getting better now.” She smiled sheepishly. Ye can ride one more beast today and he turned around and gestured for her to jump on his back. She was giggling so hard she could barely jump up so he helped her and headed for the golf cart. “I know what ye need lass, two aspirin and a bubble bath. I’ll take ye home and come back to finish up. How does that sound?” She dropped her head on his shoulder, “glorious actually.” He mentioned his alarm at the house and she groaned remembering that first morning. “Will ye feel safe enough for me to leave ye there?” She told him it would be fine and mentioned having an alarm installed in her house too.”

The golf cart pulled out of the driveway and turned toward Jaime’s home. A small brown dog hid in the bushes and watched her go by. He was hungry and lonely and only had eyes for Claire. He wanted to push his nose into her black hair like he did when she first brought him home. Before he ran into the desert chasing a rabbit and got lost.

Jaime helped Claire get comfortable with the alarm and gave her aspirin. He built a large Jacuzzi tub into the guest bathroom and stocked it with lotions and bubble bath as a treat for his sister when she came with her husband Ian, his boyhood friend. Claire was thrilled with the luxury and pushed him out of the house and back to work. “Jaime, does Laoghaire know the alarm code?” He felt his chest squeeze at the fear in her eyes. “No lass, she never had it. Keep yer phone with ye and call us if ye need anythin.”

Claire turned the water on to fill the tub and poured aromatherapy bubble bath into it. She piled her hair up until she was ready to wash it and then sank down into the bubbles. The aspirin was starting to work and she let her sore muscles relax. She thought about the show in two days and about Jaime’s relief to have a rider. She wondered if he could ever see her as more than a friend. She remembered a very handsome intern in her class who smiled at her once. She thought about him constantly after that. She would try to stand near him and catch his eye until he kissed a beautiful blonde nurse in the hall one day. She looked like a living Barbie doll and Claire… didn’t. When she paid attention, she realized that 10’s dated 10’s. She didn’t know where she was on the beauty scale but it wasn’t at Jaime’s level. She had to reign in her silly ideas or risk messing up a great friendship with him. Love had not been good for her so far. Better to leave that to the Barbie’s of the world.

With hair washed and skin softened Claire opened the frig to find something to cook for dinner. The consumption of the eggs and bacon left one orange, butter, and condiments. The freezer was dead empty. Hmm. She thought about shopping for food but that would mean dealing with the alarm. Honestly Claire, she said to herself, when have you ever been such a baby?

Claire stood in front of the alarm panel with Jaime’s instructions in hand. A deep breath and her fingers punched the buttons in the order he had written. The green light flashed, she squeezed her eyes and opened the door. All quiet. Perfect! She reset the alarm on the outside and walked back to the barn to get her truck. Siri would help her find a grocery store and she would stock Jaime’s frig with fresh food. She left him a note but wanted to hurry because it was getting late in the day.

An hour later she parked in the driveway and pulled two armfuls of bags out of the back. She stood in front of the alarm and took a deep breath before punching in the numbers. Greenlight, another
success. When the food was put away Jaime called to invite her to dinner with Angus and Rupert and she was thrilled. She ran to the guest room to find some better clothes.

When Jaime walked in Claire was reading on the couch. Her long hair was down and fluffy around her shoulders. She wore a white sleeveless blouse with silver tips on the collar and tailored to hug her waist. Very low riding black jeans and boots. She looked up and he inhaled sharply when she met his eyes. Those eyes, he thought, they are so beautiful. Claire suddenly felt shy with him standing there looking at her. She was so attracted to him and feared he would see it so she jumped up and started talking about shopping.

Jaime smiled and asked for two minutes to grab a fresh shirt. He opened the door for her and she watched him walk around the front of his truck. Down girl, this is not a date, he is not your boyfriend, and your infatuation is going to ruin this. So stop!

They ordered margaritas in big fancy glasses with salty tortilla chips and spicy bean dip. They talked through juicy steaks and the second round of drinks. Rupert and Angus kept Claire laughing at the stories of their childhood in Scotland. Claire wasn’t aware that she was wiping her mouth and the makeup covering her bruised lip. When they got up to leave, the restaurant was packed and they weaved between people toward the door. Passing a group of drunk men, one of them grabbed Claire’s shoulder and pointed to her mouth. “That will teach ya not to argue!” he howled at the comment and Claire’s hand flew up to her mouth. Jaime was still at the table leaving a tip but saw Rupert shove the man into the wall with a murderous look. Angus was right behind him. Jaime was between them in seconds and moved his group along. Claire was astonished at how Rupert defended her and felt Jaime’s arm wrap around her waist. She kept her hand up until they were outside.

She got a squeeze from both of the men before they piled into Angus’s pickup and they were gone. “Are ye well Sassenach?” Jaime looked down at her while he opened her door. “A little embarrassed by my face and a little surprised by Rupert.” He started the truck and indulged himself in a long look. “Me too, he usually doesn’t show that much restraint.” Claire’s head jerked up to see if he was kidding. He wasn’t.

The drinks were making her eyes heavy on the way home and she was quick to say goodnight once they were home. When the door was closed behind her she put on her sweats and tried to relax. Being this close to him was making her want something she couldn’t have. She needed to go home and put some distance between them. She prayed she could overcome her fear and be happy there alone.

Jaime showered and thought about Claire. He hoped she was physically ready for the show. She seemed a little fragile physically, and why wouldn’t she after being hit twice. He fell into bed and drifted off. At some point during the night, he felt her climb in beside him. He wrapped himself around her and felt her shake. “My sweet lass, ye can sleep now, I’m here for as long as ye need me to be.” He dropped one arm around her and felt her bare skin on his forearm. She reached down and pulled her t-shirt down but it was too late to stop the current of electricity that went through him. He was willing himself to relax when what he wanted to do is run his fingers along that exposed skin on her stomach. Holding her was torture but he couldn’t let her go. He was screwed.

Claire slipped out of his bed before dawn. Something about the sun coming up made her braver. She slept a bit more downstairs but was up and dressed to leave with Jaime. She spent the morning with Fred and Ginger feeling the luxury of the bigger western saddle she used with them. She rode Fred up the hill and looked at her front door. It didn’t feel terrible so she resolved to go home after the weekend in New Mexico. Jaime seemed distant today and she was surely wearing out her welcome.

The afternoon was spent with Angus again but today she felt even more confident and the horses
were giving more as well. Rupert reported to Jaime that the horses were performing at peak and his cheeks were pink with excitement. Jaime gave a curt response and dropped his head into his work. “Not the response I expected Jaime.” Rupert turned a brotherly eye on him and decided not to push. Jaime pushed back from his desk and stared at the wall. He was going crazy being so close to Claire. It took all of his strength not to touch her last night. Let his fingers caress skin on her stomach, back, breasts. He felt his erection and the hopelessness of working with Claire as a business arrangement. He never felt out of control with a woman but he did with her and it was driving him insane.

He stood up and walked for a while. He walked into the foothills and considered the problem. He can’t turn off his feelings even if she is the best rider he’s ever seen. Hard as he tried his mind would go back to his fingers on her skin. It was hopeless.

Back at the barn he watched Claire for a while and knew they would do very well this weekend. If she rides half as well over the next two days he will be coming home with an empty trailer. Yet he was miserable.

When Rupert saw Jaime looking at Claire he knew what was ailing his friend. Is he daft? That lass has it bad for him but he canna see it. Rupert’s laugh was quiet and he shook his head. Let’s hope they figure this out before we lose the best team we’ve ever had, he thought.

Claire jumped off horse number four and handed the reigns to Rupert. She was anxious to get over to Jaime’s and cook a big dinner to thank him for all he had done these past few days. One more bubble bath for her stiff muscles wouldn’t set her time back too much and this was her last opportunity to enjoy the luxury. Tomorrow they leave for New Mexico, after that she was going to her own home and out of his hair.

Rupert was locking up when Jaime found him. “How do you think Claire will do in the stadium jumping? Is she ready?” Rupert smiled “if the lass can concentrate and stop looking for Cupid to slay ye with an arrow she should be fine.” Rupert walked away to finish his chores hoping Jaime would come after him for clarification. “Ah, Rupert… what did ye mean by that?”

When Jaime opened the door the smell of roast beef and fresh roasted honey carrots made his mouth water. The table was set and Claire was tossing a salad. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail, his weakness, and she wore soft clothes that begged to be pulled off. He shook his head and thought about his empty stomach. It offered a modicum of control. “What’s this Sassenach?” She turned her smile on him and explained it was her way of thanking him. She asked him to sit and eat, everything was ready. She piled his plate and ladled gravy on the beef. She pushed a small mound of horseradish in case he liked that. Fixing her own plate she sat down and they enjoyed silent companionship while they ate.
Jaime was impressed with her skills in the kitchen and told her so. “Is there anythin ye canna do Sassenach?” She rewarded him with a blush. They talked about when they were leaving in the morning and that she needed to stop by her house for her clothes. When Jaime’s hand covered hers she stopped talking and looked up at him. He pulled her palm towards him and ran his finger along the lines. “Ah, yer palm tells me much about yer life mo chridhe.” Claire was feeling butterflies by his hand holding hers, “what?” Jaime looked down and ran his finger along another line, “this one says ye have someone who loves ye.” Claire looked, “no, I don’t.” Jaime dropped his head to hide his grin, “this one says he is close to ye.” Claire rolled her eyes, “you’re really not good at this, are you? It’s okay, thank you.” She didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t have been more wrong. She stood to move the dishes to the sink and Jaime helped. He stood right behind her and she knew this was not proximity to share between friends. His breath was in her ear, “Claire, I hope I’m not chasin ye out the front door but I have to tell ye lass, my feelins are strong for ye, ken?”

Claire closed her eyes and could not catch her breath. What was happening? A voice in her head shouted turn around, let the man communicate. What was he saying? She wondered. Turn Around! She turned, “what?” She was inches from his chest and her heart was ramming. “Sorry, what?” said weakly. Jaime dropped his head and whispered in her ear. I want ye Claire, every hair, hand, shoulder, hip, and mouth.” She was suffocating by holding her breath. “What?” She wasn’t sure the words came out due to the tornado in her mind.

“Let’s trade places.” There was an uptick to Jaime’s voice and he rolled up his sleeves. He could see her reflection in the window and worried she might just pass-out before he got through to her. He gently pulled her back and slid in her place. “C’mon Claire, arms on either side of me. That’s a good lass.” He started washing dishes and waited. If Rupert was wrong I will pull his tongue out, he thought. Then it happened. He felt a soft, tentative hand on his back. He forced himself to keep moving the same way. The hand moved across his back and up to his shoulder and arm. He closed his eyes and concentrated on being a dirty dish with scum floating above him. Her hand pressed down his spine and her palm pressed his buttock. Game over, I lose, here I come.

Jaime turned around with wet soapy hands and pulled her to his mouth. He pressed his lips to hers softly, waiting for a push back. When that didn’t happen he pulled her arms up around his neck and pulled her close, kissing her deeply. His head was spinning and he was thankful for restrictive denim. Once released, he would be like set concrete, hungry for her, growling a need from weeks of push back.

His hand was finally allowed a bit of freedom?. He would find out how much. His tongue danced with her's and she gasped for air when she could. I’m sorry lass, he thought, I don’t seem to need air at the moment so take what ye need. He tugged on her ponytail lifting her head and exposing her neck. He licked it from collar bone to jaw. She gasped and he released her to drop her head into his waiting lips. He consumed her. Claire was in a trance from sensory overload. She had no critical thinking at the moment like her brain shut all areas down except sensory, arousal, and respiration. Her reptilian brain. She felt his knuckles so soft on the bare skin of her stomach. She decided that was the most intense feeling she ever had.

Claire needed to touch him and willed her hands to let go of each of other. Her hands slid down from his shoulders over his chest. “Jesus Christ!” she whispered. Her hands were under their own power because his mouth was demanding her attention. He pulled back and looked at her. She was a completely different person, so sensual, and under his control. He shook with need. A thought popped into his head and he scoffed at it. He flipped his hand over and pressed palm and fingers into
her soft skin. Another deep kiss and he moaned as his hand touched the swell of her breast. She pulled at his shirt tail and ran her hands up his back. The thought popped again, so he asked her.

“Lassie, ye done this before have ye?” Please don’t be a virgin, he thought. “Lassie?” Claire was swimming to the surface as fast as she could. “Yes. One hundred and eight times, I am very experienced. Kiss please.” He looked at her and wanted her to open her eyes. “Why do ye hide from me lass?” He kissed her deeply and covered her breast as he listened for her gasp. He heard it but something was wrong. He wanted her to lead a bit so he would feel confident to push forward. Her face and hands were present and accounted for, but what about the prime directive of making love? An inquiry as old as mankind itself, when the body is commanded by a sexual need to find friction. Her hips were against the sink and he was nearly spent holding his body away from her, giving her time to press into him. All stop! Jaime pulled away from her. His chest was heaving and so was hers.

Claire opened her eyes with effort and reached for his mouth. Jaime picked her up and turned lights off as he moved through the living room. He laid her on the couch and noticed her body contract slightly. He turned on a small lamp and walked back to the couch studying her. Elbows touching her sides, almost in the fighter’s position. It was obvious she was interested so what the devil was holding her back?

Jaime dropped to his knees and let his fingers caress her soft skin. “Claire, open yer eyes lass.” She did and looked at him. She pulled the band from her hair and instantly the elbows were back at her sides. Jaime wanted to grab her hair and bend her to his will. Is this what happens when I’m in love? This confusion? He wondered. Something at the pit of his stomach told him to go slow or forever pay the price.

He kissed her deeply and she wrapped her arms around his neck pulling him to her. He pulled away slowly watching how long it took to open her eyes. “It’s time for the seventh inning stretch mo gradhag.” He walked to the bar and grabbed a fine bottle of whiskey and two glasses. Claire sat up and took the glass. Her eyes were smoldering and his confusion mounted. “I have a rule about whiskey and love, one glass limit.” Claire put her empty glass on the table and Jaime’s resolve to hold back vanished. He pressed her into the couch and crushed his lips to hers, a moments loss of control and he was laying on her pressing his erection into her.

“Claire? Lass, please look at me?” She opened her eyes. “I am gonna kiss ye but ye need to keep yer eyes open, or I stop, aye? “Haven’t I been doing that? He smiled down at her. “Not yet, and I miss them when ye hide from me.” She smiled, “kiss.” His kiss was deep and demanding, his body was screaming at him to take her upstairs and get busy. All stop!

“Come my sweet lass, we need a walk before I melt on ye.” He wrapped his arms around her, “I dinna want to confuse ye Sassenach, so I need to tell ye I’m in love with ye. I want to be sure before I touch ye that we’re on the same page, so we’re walkin, ken? He stroked her cheek, ye need to tell me who Dr. Claire Beauchamp is and I will do the same lass. Do ye agree?

Claire’s mind was starting to focus but she felt uncomfortable all of a sudden. “I don’t understand Jaime.” He looked down at her trying to get his lust under control. “I suppose it’s like a new patient, ken? Would ye treat someone who had a five or ten-year gap in medical history?” Claire considered this, “well, no.”

Jaime took her hand and walked toward the door. It was eight o’clock and they had a four AM alarm. Think with your regular brain, he told himself, yer rider is not one-hundred percent physically. She needs to sleep. Claire was reeling with happiness, he said he loved her, his kiss drove her crazy, his body is incredible, he loves me!

They walked along the dirt road toward Claire’s house and talked about the show. Jaime’s head was
screaming, ask her this, and ask her that, fuck... ask her everything! He shook it. Can we grab yer clothes Sassenach?” She was back to her sensible brain, Jaime felt a momentary sadness about that. He was thrilled to see her so pliant and ready in his arms. So why make a fuss over closing her eyes or not pressing into him. Because yer an idiot! He shook his head again.

Claire was happy there was no terror in seeing her driveway where the attack occurred, nor inside. Her bedroom was trashed and she had a momentary memory of the lace bodysuit being thrown at her. She breathed deep and Jaime looked for her riding clothes and boots and pushed her to leave. “Wait! My pin.” She grabbed her pin and showed him. “It's all they had at Sheplers but it will do.” She had two bags for everything and away they went.

“Claire, we have a four-hour ride to the showgrounds. It will be easy to talk then and you can get some sleep tonight. Does that sound reasonable?” She giggled, “of course it does.” She was quiet and a blush spread across her cheeks.”Could I have one more kiss tonight please.” Jaime felt his legs wobble over that comment and crushed her to him. “I love ye lass, sleep tight,” he whispered.

Claire closed the door to the guest bedroom and leaned against it. “My oh, my.” She twirled around the room putting her gear on hangers and packing a bag with stuff for two days. She was in dreamland and so happy.

Jaime stood under a cold shower. There was a bottle of whiskey on his table. Sleep had to come soon because she pulled him to her from the floor below. “Christ lass, I’m losing my mind.” They had taken the leap tonight and he no longer had to hide or resist touching her. That was huge and he could rest tonight in that knowledge. His groin did not agree so he turned the cold dial up. If ye come to my bed tonight lass, I promise nothin, he thought.

Rupert and Angus already had two horses brushed and wrapped. Claire got started on the other two. She got hugs from Fred and Ginger who were sleepy but happy to see her, even happier for the carrots. Once everything was loaded they piled into two trucks and headed for the show.

“When my family came to America I was not happy, I hated it here and wanted to go home. One day wandering around I found a show barn with all the jumps and arenas and I was fascinated. The owner’s name was Gellis and she let me work for lessons. I loved riding the quality of horses she had and learned quick. Became her rider for two years and we did well. But, time spent together and missin my family who had returned to Scotland, I leaned on her for company, and eventually found my way to her bed. She was older and very experienced and I could not find a single thing wrong with our arrangement. Does it bother ye to hear this mo gradhag?” Claire shook her head, “no, of course not. What happened then?” Jaime relayed the details of his youth, his skyrocketing skill, her jealousy when he accepted an offer to ride for another barn, and the ultimate goodbye. “I see her now and again and we smile but that’s about it.”

Claire looked up at him, “and then?” Jaime took her hand and explained it was important for her to sit beside him to balance the rig. She laughed and moved over next to him. His thumb caressed her hand lazily as he drove and they talked. “Then, it seemed I could’na stay out of the lassie's beds even when I tried. It became the reason for me to move on to another owner or another barn, ye ken? It was rubbin on the morals my mam taught me and finally I put a stop to it. I was tired of feelin like a sinner. I stayed away from the lasses for two years and that extra time and energy had to go somewhere so I put it into building my own business. I had a great year with national and international championships and suddenly the sponsors were comin out of the woodwork, as the Americans say.” He laughed. Laoghaire made it easy for me, ye ken? She was my rider and the naked girl in my bed. I decided my celibacy could end. It was a mistake to let it go like that. I understand that now.”
Claire was shocked he spoke so openly about his sex life. She was thankful he did because it was something she wondered about. It sounded like a normal male coming into his sexual maturity. One more secret I know about Jaime, she thought. It took about a minute to realize she had never shared any information with him about her life. She was sorry about that after his easy admission. She didn’t know where to start, so she asked him. “I would like for you to know me, but where would I start?”

Jaime took a breath of relief and smiled at her, “let’s start at birth Sassenach, I want to everything about you.” He knew there was nothing she could say that would change the way he felt about her, but he wanted her to open up and trust him.

Claire told him about losing her parents at age five and living in the jungles and deserts with her uncle who raised her. She gave him an overview of medical school, internship, and residency, and what led her to specialize in burn rehabilitation. All very interesting to Jaime but he needed to know who drove her out of Boston. “What brought ye here to Arizona lass?” He looked directly in her eyes when he asked. “Just so ye know I will be needin a ten-minute kiss soon.” She laughed. Claire looked out the window and started talking about a man she met when she was twenty-one, in her internship. He was a surgeon who fancied her and asked for her services whenever he got the chance. He was very famous for techniques he developed in plastic surgery and people came to him from all over the world. It was he who inspired her love of that specialty. She was a virgin when they met and …not a virgin one year later. I actually had to ask him at that point if I was his girlfriend.” She laughed but Jaime could hear the question was still in her statement. “Anyway, he asked me to marry him after my boards and I was over the moon. We would share a surgical practice, a white picket fence in front of our house, and some kids to round out the fantasy in my head. He seemed perfect for me but he did not like my friends very much and complained about them often. One by one I distanced myself from all of them and focused only on him.” Claire paused and looked out the window.

“Sorry sassenach, I can’t wait to kiss ye.” Jaime pulled into a truck stop and pulled her to him. Claire melted into him and felt her ramming heartbeat. His hands moved up and barely touched her breast. She was gasping and needy, he wanted to devour her and clung to the steering wheel with a heaving chest. “Right then, ready?” The sadness she felt creeping up to wrap her heart in cold claws was gone in a puff. She felt new things with Jaime and wanted to feel more. “And then?” He asked.

Claire shook her head and took a breath. “Um, we lived like that for two years, engaged I mean, while I completed my residency. I had rotations that would be scheduled at night and sometimes spend forty-eight hours at the hospital and not see him. He complained about his loneliness a lot. I felt guilty he was at home waiting all the time. I was riding for two owners during my last year which kept me away even more. He put his foot down after too many arguments. Him or the horse. It was the hardest thing I have ever done. My last show I won the National Cup in Palm Beach. I remember thinking this is my last salute to the judge.” Claire wiped tears from her cheeks, “sorry.” Jaime put his arm around her and drew her to him. “I can’t even imagine the sacrifice Claire.”

They rode in silence for a few minutes and Jaime pulled off again and crushed her to him. His kiss was deep and it stole Claire's breath and brain. He teased her with his tongue letting her taste just the tip before pulling it back, then did it again. She would push her tongue to meet his, hungry for him and finally pushed it into his mouth. Jaime groaned loudly. “Do it again Sassenach!” He breathed. She did and her world tilted. Jaime was feeling out of control. He was so happy to feel her assert herself with him. “My God lassie, I am havin trouble breathin.” He whispered in her ear, please let me taste ye one more time.” He crushed his lips to hers and her tongue was in his mouth and hungry. Claire felt something between her legs and freaked out. Oh shit, no, no, no, it’s not time for that… fuck!. “I’ll be right back.” Claire dashed for the bathroom cursing her stupid period. She looked everywhere for it. What the heck, there’s no missing that feeling of wet panties. She ran back to the truck much happier and then stopped in her happy tracks. Her mind started to boil as she realized it
was her arousal that caused her wet core. And it was Frank who never made that happen. “Prick!”

Once on the road, Jaime leaned toward her, “and then?” She laughed. “Well, not much story left. I was coming out of the resident overnight rooms and overheard Frank’s name so I bent to the drinking fountain to listen. These two surgeons were complaining that Frank was nominated for a particular award that can be a career changer.” She hesitated, ”then one said it was because he was fucking the judges, all four of them, he said. I can remember watching the water pool in the pan of the fountain before running down the drain. I stayed like that for so long my back started hurting and an orderly asked what I was doing.” I walked around the hospital in a stupor for a couple of hours. I didn’t know what to do. I had seen the signs and ignored them. I went home and called Frank’s assistant. I always liked her. I told her if she ever thought me a friend to tell me the truth. She did and it crushed me. He chased away all my friends, I gave up my jumping career and I had nothing left.” She paused, so I took a restraining order out on him, told the judge he threatened me. I had him served and moved his stuff out of my house. I hired a service to move it to his office. Sold my house, my surgical practice, my furniture, my Corvette. Bought a truck and left.”

Claire looked at Jaime. He was astounded at her bravery. He never thought she had a story this raw to share and felt bad for pushing her. He pulled off the road again. “Claire, my sweetest Sassenach, I’m sorry for pushin ye to tell me. Are ye all right lass? He touched her cheek and got lost in her eyes. “Oh, yea, more than okay!” The whole relationship was such an effort and I don’t think he was any good at sex.” Jaime almost swallowed his tongue. He was incredulous. “What makes ye say that lassie?” She looked up, “personal things I feel with you actually.” He looked closely at her. “I’ve had sex with him one hundred and eight times, and then last night kind of turned a light on all that.” Jaime remembered her comment that she was very experienced. He was overcome with love for her and so appreciated her honesty. So the prick pulled her panties down and made himself come then turned over. Oh my God, there are actually people in the world like that. Frank, we will meet someday, I guarantee it.

“I love ye, sweet lassie. Thank ye for tellin me.” His kiss was so soft and full of love it made her eyes burn with tears. “If we stop again I will miss my first class… just sayin.” Claire giggled. Jaime dropped it in drive and they barreled down the last leg of the trip. Rupert was flirting and Angus was pissed they were late. He needed to work all four horses before the show started. He saw them pull in and dragged Rupert back to the present pushing a lead rope in his hands. With the first two horses off the trailer, Claire took one and talked about the history of the prickly pear cactus, hand on chest, short rope and walk toward the ramp. When hooves touched grass she praised him. Rupert asked a question about the cactus and Claire looked at him confused. “I don’t know anything about it, I just made that up.” Rupert looked cheated as he led the horse to a stall.
Jaime was busy with registration of the horses, sale price, and Claire’s name as the rider. It took forty-five minutes. Claire’s disclosure played over and over in his head. He was dumbfounded by her courage to come across the country alone, and haul two horses. Now she would ride for him and turn his business around. He walked back to the barn passing the tables of merchandise for sale. He picked up a beautiful pin of a jumper and rider and bought it for her. It was an exciting day.

Jaime found Rupert, and knew Angus was on a horse in the schooling pen but where was Claire? The aisles were crowded with people and he was getting frantic.”Rupert, I told ye to stay with her!” He looked up at his friend, “well, okay, but she’s changin her clothes and I’ll probably see her naked.” He turned toward the ladies room and Jaime caught him by the shoulder and pushed him back. Rupert laughed good-naturedly. Jaime walked toward the restrooms and saw her eyes through the crowd. She was walking toward them. All at once the people in front of her moved away and it was just Claire. Her hair was tightly pulled back in a bun, her eyes were lined and her mouth made his chest hurt. She had red lipstick on that smiled when she saw him. White breeches, white top, and a finely cut black coat. She was a vision. Jaime glanced at Rupert and slapped his arm the way he was staring at her. She had a copy of the dressage course in her hand… seven more minutes.

“Ye look fancy!” Rupert said. She laughed at him. Jaime couldn’t move. He knew she had to memorize the course in the next few minutes. She dropped her arm and closed her eyes for several minutes. “Okay, I got it.” Jamie handed her a box and said “good luck Sassenach.” Her eyes were wide when she pulled out the pin. “Oh my God Jaime, this is so beautiful!” She pulled off her gloves and stuck them between her knees, quickly changing pins. “Is it straight?” Jaime nodded with pride and love in his eyes. “yer up after next rider.” Angus waved to her from outside and she walked quickly to mount up. Jaime saw Angus giving her last minute instructions while he rubbed sheen over the horse’s neck and rump. He put his hand over her’s and said what looked like ‘good luck.’ All three men stood at the fence holding their breath.

Claire was waved in by a show worker and her name was announced over the loudspeaker. She looked calm but Angus noticed the horse getting a few sharp reminders by her leg. “Shit,” he said quietly. She stood statue still and looked the judges in the eye. Her hat came off in a bow. They signaled her to begin. Her head was up, eyes forward but she landed every change and pushed her horse into an extended trot at a break-neck speed cutting across the arena. Jaime heard the crowd murmur as she executed each change perfectly. When Jaime saw the horse pull the reigns through her hands he knew it was over. She rode past the judges the picture of composure and the horse’s head had dropped forward perfectly. She saluted once more from across the ring, turned her mount and walked out of the arena. The crowd clapped and she waved at them gratefully. “Oh my God, the lass even has the crowd,” Rupert said. Jaime rolled his eyes, “enough of the hero worship, they clap for every rider.”

Angus was on Claire as she walked toward them. “What happened?” She was telling him about something and her voice was too quiet for Jaime to hear. Angus swung up on the horse and headed for the schooling pen. When Claire looked up she looked pale and Jaime was concerned. He steered her away from Rupert, “what’s amiss Sassenach.” She was giggling and looked up at him, “I accidentally held my breath until I walked out of the ring and nearly passed out!” She took her helmet off and a deep breath. Her hands shook slightly. Jaime kissed her cheek, “ye did good, better than I hoped Sassenach.” She smiled at him gratefully.

They all took a rest in the shade, except Angus who continued to work the horses. Claire watched him jump her next horse. The horse was clearing the fences without a nick, and taking rider cues
perfectly. People stood at the rail watching the riders work out. Rupert was asking Claire about the cactus again and Jaime was laughing at them both. They heard a collective gasp from the crowd and Jamie shot out of his seat. Claire stood and tried to see where Angus was. She knew that sound and her heart was pounding. She started running, so did Rupert. At the rail they saw Jaime catch the horse and quiet him. Rupert jumped the rail and helped Angus stand. “Oh my God!” Claire’s hand came to her mouth. When a horse stops dead in front of a fence often times the rider is pitched over its head and falls hard. More people gathered at the rail when word went out that a rider was thrown. Angus could not put pressure on his foot and Rupert was helping him limp out of the pen. Jaime was left with the horse and a task at hand. The remedy for a quit was harsh and Jaime swung up and pushed 65 into a trot and canter. Claire’s heart was beating so fast she thought she might pass out. Jaime approached the fence and the horse refused the correct lead. He turned him in a tight circle with a sharp reminder with his leg. Claire watched closely as Jaime pushed into the bit and as the horse was about to leap over the jump it quit! “Jesus H Roosevelt Christ!” Horse and rider were struggling and Jaime made it clear he was going over the jump. Suddenly from a near standstill, the horse leaped over the jump and landed perfectly. The crowd clapped and Jaime pushed him over again, twice. He left the pen and searched the crowd for Angus. Several people patted him on the back and arm. He smiled and nodded. Claire got closer when she heard people say his name and realized many of them knew Jaime by his wins. “My famous boyfriend,” she whispered.

Jaime asked Claire to ride with him to register them for the night. She jumped at the chance and they walked in silence to the truck. Jaime grabbed her hand and pulled her to his side of the vehicle. “I’m hungry for ye lass.” His hand came around the back of her neck and he pulled her to his mouth. His kiss was delicious and Claire timidly touched his lips with her tongue, then his teeth. Jaime groaned and pushed her against the truck. He broke the kiss and looked at the heavens, “sweet lord, give me the strength to resist this woman.” He helped her up and they drove to find the hotel. Jamie chose a mid-priced hotel for the night but wished he had done better. He would be alone with Claire tonight if he had to give Rupert and Angus knock-out drops. Her close proximity to him was making him crazy so he was glad to accept the three key cards and get her back to the car.

The desk hostess smiled too much and looked in his eyes too much and touched his arm too much, she was just too much, Claire decided. It was rude to flirt with another woman’s man in front of her. Claire caught her lingering fingers when she dropped the key cards in his hand. “Ah!” Claire’s mouth was open like she would say something and the hostess backed away. I have a horse that weighs almost a ton and I will kick the shit out of him this afternoon. You would just be a warm-up you floozy. “Ready mo gradhag?” Jaime was looking from one woman to the other and decided he would take the lead. He scooped Claire toward the door and kissed the top of her head.

Claire loved kissing Jaime. It was so sexy and he was so gorgeous. She wondered if he noticed all the women looking at him. Not just at the show, everywhere they went. She remembered going to the bathroom remodel showroom where the lady was tripping over herself to bring him samples. He told her twice that I was the one shopping but it made no difference. Claire wanted to trip her. She suddenly realized that she had no control over Jaime. He had freedom of choice every day and what would stop him from accepting the attention of one of them, or all of them. “Jesus Christ,” she said aloud, “Sassenach?” Claire looked at him with an accusing eye and felt her blood boil. “Shit!” she shouted. Jaime looked at her helplessly as she walked ahead of him and waited on the passenger side. Her arms were crossed and her face was flushed. Jaime opened her door, “Sassenach.” She got in and slammed the door.
On the ride back she pushed her body against the door and refused to speak to Jaime about why she was so unhappy. She wanted out of the truck right now and wished she had a barrier between them. If Frank did it, so will you Jaime Fraser. Hurry up, I want out of this truck! The second he parked Claire was on her feet running back to the barn. Jaime was dumbfounded and lonely in the wake of her attitude and abandonment. His heart hurt and he had no clue why she got so heated. They would talk this out, he knew that, but it might take a couple days for the opportunity and he thought his heart may break in the meantime.

Claire had one more event in the afternoon, stadium jumping on the big gelding that tossed Angus. She had no fear of him but she was mad that he now had a very, very, undesirable trait. Jaime needed to sell the horse quickly but word would spread about the schooling accident and buyers would hear it. She fumed and then walked to her belongings where she pushed her spurs onto the back of her boots. When she turned around she ran full-bodied into Rupert. “Jesus Rupert, do I smell really good today? Why do I keep bumping into you?” Rupert maintained his calm demeanor and smiled, “no lass, ye smell like a horse, I’m just following orders from Jaime. She huffed and walked out to find Angus.

She could hear the snoring from fifty paces away and turned a trained ear on the snore that stopped for several seconds and abruptly resumed with a gasp. There were three cans of beer on the ground under him and Claire felt her irritation. “Angus! Why didn’t you go with Jaime to check into the hotel? It is a much better place to rest.” Angus pushed up with a snort and rubbed his eyes trying to focus on his annoyance. “Is it time Claire?” He was mildly drunk and Claire thought if you scratch your balls my foot will see you in the dirt! Thankfully, he declined the scratch and looked up at her grinning.

Jaime numbered the horses rather than bother with the long registered names they always had. Claire’s concern was number 65 who lazed in his stall, congratulating himself, no doubt on a job well done. Will see about that, she thought. “I wasn’t close enough to see 65 quit and I want to know which side he favored before that.” Angus was nearly blinded when the sun caught her spurs just right. He raised a hand to his eyes to shield them. “Ye canna wear those in the ring lassie.” She took a breath, “my event does not start for thirty minutes so I’m taking him to the pen for a warm up.” He was trying to feel alarmed at her idea but the alcohol made it difficult. “The wee devil will go to the right, but …” Claire spun in the direction of the barn and ran right into Rupert. Claire steadied herself and silently counted to ten. “Let’s get 65 ready so I can warm him up.” Rupert seemed not to notice her running into him for the tenth time today. “Ok lass, but ye canna wear em spurs in the ring.” Claire walked away, 1-2-3-4….

Claire zipped her chaps up and clipped them into her belt loops. She rolled up her sleeves, pressed her helmet on and walked with Rupert to the pen where she mounted and saw Jaime walking toward them. Her heart skipped a beat and she reminded herself that 10’s care about 10’s and she was an appetizer. Fucking men. Rupert cleared his throat and handed her the crop. He was leaning against the rail when Jaime walked up looking at Claire work 65 in an intricate pattern through the jumps. He saw the horse flex just a bit to the right with a sharp reprimand from Claire. He was an excellent jumper and Claire started to relax a bit. Then it happened. Right in front of the jump, the horse ground to a halt. Claire gripped him with her thighs and brought the crop down on his ass with a loud snap! Rupert jumped at the sound and watched the horse sail through the air. She circled him again and again until he was frothing at the mouth. She brought him to a trot and gave him a pat. “you’re a good boy 65.” She walked the horse and watched what she could see of the stadium jumping while avoiding Jaime’s eyes. She heard nicks here and there, then a pole came down from a lazy back foot. “Looks like a cake walk 65, she said giggling. Jaime motioned her to him where he stared her down.

Claire jumped to the ground and rubbed 65’s neck. “You mind your manners and I’ll give you a
treat.” Jaime was quiet and she looked up at him. He ran his eyes up her legs tightly encased in her chaps. “I dinna, I canna, the horse, he” Jaime shook his head. “What happened to ye Sassenach, back at the hotel, did someone say somethin to ye?” Claire looked up at him with tears in her eyes which shocked Jaime. “You said something to me.” Her voice was so quiet, “you said a lot of things to me that you shouldn’t have said because I’m an appetizer and there are ten’s right here that want you.” Jaime eyed her with a racing heart. He searched his mind looking for a clue of what she was talking about. Then he remembered her saying “guys like you don’t date girls like me.” He got it. Maybe something had set her off but it was clear they were no longer on the same page. She sniffled and started to walk away. Jaime reached for her pulling her up to his mouth, and kissed her deeply. She felt it to her toes. He broke and pressed his forehead to hers. “Here this Claire, I love ye, I want ye, yer mine, now and forever. I will show ye tonight how a man treats a woman he loves and ye will understand my intentions. When ye wake tomorrow mornin ye will be a different woman and ye will never doubt. Please say ye will wait until we can be alone. My heart is breakin Claire.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him so tight. “I’m sorry Jaime. I’m really stupid and sorry. I’m not like this, not jealous. Something came over me.” He brushed her tears away. “I love this side of ye, so loving and soft. I hope ye will let me see it again in a bit. But for now Sassenach, ye need to put on yer armor. I will take it off ye, one piece at a time.” He kissed her again. “And for the love of God take yer chaps off before I bent ye over right here. She giggled, like music to his ears, and pulled the zippers down.

Jaime waited for Claire to get ready and he barely felt the movements of the horse behind him. He saw Claire in his mind, naked, stretched out on his bed, smiling up at him and begging for more. Someone slapped him on the shoulder and he snapped back with a gulp of air. Angus was smiling and showing Jaime the crutches that were lent to him by the show sponsors. “Now I can watch Claire and the beastie up close!” Jaime grunted and went back to his fantasy. She was right under him asking for a kiss when someone slapped his arm. He jerked his head up with irritation. “Claire said if she runs into me one more time she’ll have my balls in a vise Jaime.” Angus laughed at Rupert’s hurt expression. “Don’t stand so close” Jaime said as he exhaled the fantasy. He heard Claire’s sing-song voice and turned around, “I’m ready.” He gave her a leg-up and left his hand on her thigh for a few seconds. He felt crippled by his need and looked up at her. “One more for today lass, then we celebrate.” His voice sounded shaky to him. Jesus, get a grip man he thought.

Claire pulled her helmet and dropped her head in salute, then moved the horse to canter from a standstill. She had the horse well in hand and felt him extend nicely over the jumps. She looked to her left at the approaching in-and-out, two jumps spaced with only one stride between them. When 65 saw what was coming his hind end came around to right and Claire nailed him harshly with her foot behind the girth. He was instantly righted and sailed through the double jump with ease. “That’s going to cost me, you big idiot.” The rest of the course he was perfect.

Claire jumped down and handed the horse to Rupert. She checked on Angus who was asleep again. Jaime was stowing tack in the horse trailer. He took out the blankets and threw one to Rupert and one to Claire. Once the horses were covered and fed they woke up Angus and agreed to meet downstairs in the hotel bar in an hour for dinner. Claire was quiet but seemed happy. Jamie wanted the weekend to be over so he could have Claire undistributed. He reached for his cell phone and walked toward a quieter place.

Claire had Angus’s mess cleaned up while he and Rupert were swinging the crunches at each other for fun. “See you guys later for dinner,” she said and then walked toward Jaime’s truck. She leaned against it waiting for Jaime and let her mind drift. She was bone tired and hungry but felt an urgent need to experience whatever Jaime was talking about. She couldn’t believe there was that much more to sex than what she knew. It was time for her to find out.

“Ready Sassenach?” Jaime had a fine blush to his cheeks and looked happier than she had seen him
in days. “Why do ye look so different Jaime?” He kissed her mouth, “because we just sold two horses!” He picked her up and swung her around covering her face in kisses. “Ah thank ye Sassenach for helpin me with this show.” They drove to the hotel very satisfied with the day. Once in the hotel he handed Claire a key card and said he would meet her in the bar in an hour. He kissed her and then opened her door.

Claire was on cloud nine and so happy for Jaime. She laid across the bed on her back and grappled with her boots. She went next door and knocked for Jaime to pull them off but Rupert answered the door, and the call to duty. She sat on a bed and he grabbed her boot as she pushed against his butt. Then the other one came off and she picked them up in her stocking feet and left. Rupert threw his hands in the air, “no tip?”
Chapter 9

Claire peeled off her dirty clothes and stepped into a hot shower. She realized there was a permanent smile on her lips and shook her head with the crazy happiness of it all. She rushed to dry her hair, and add some makeup, then looked at what street clothes she brought. She chose a royal blue angora sweater, fitted, with the shoulders cut out so no bra. White jeans and silver belt and boots. Her face was pink from the sun today. She regarded her look and wondered if she would embarrass herself with misbehaving nipples. She really wanted Jaime to feel the soft angora…. She ran out the door to the front desk, panting, she asked the clerk for some tape and ran back to her room. She lifted the sweater to her neck and placed a piece of tape over each nipple. Happy with the results she left to meet the guys in the bar stopping to return the tape.

She could hear Angus when she walked in and headed in that direction. Jaime looked at her and nearly dropped his bottle of bear. She looked radiant with her glowing face, and fluffy hair, and Jesus Christ! She has been sent here to kill me, he thought. How am I suppose to not touch that? The guys stood when she came to the table and Rupert whistled at her. Angus said, “my girlfriend looks just like her.” It took several minutes for the laughter to stop and they decided it was time to eat. Jaime suggested a steak house and everyone agreed.

He pulled Claire to his side of the truck and held her at arm's length looking closely at every inch of her. Her sweater stopped just at the waistband of her jeans and he wanted to lift it and keep looking. Claire pulled a tissue from her purse and wiped her lipstick off. “Kiss, please?” Jaime’s arms were soft around her like she might break. His kiss was slow, soft and electrifying to Claire. His hands ran over her back and arms, and he kept saying "soft…so soft." Claire was in a seduced trance and her eyes sparkled when she looked up at him. “I am starving but all I need are kisses,” she said dreamily. Jaime pulled the door open behind her and pushed her against the seat kissing her deeply. She felt his fingers touch her bare skin and her mind screamed ‘don’t let him touch your nipples!’ Her eyes flew open and she broke the kiss. “Actually, I need to eat .. before I pass out!” She scrambled up into the seat and smiled. Jaime started the truck and looked at her face, “ye know Sassenach, I can’t tell when yer blushing with that sunburn, but it sure is pretty.”

Before heading to the bar to meet up with the team, Jamie had time to shop for things that would make their time tonight special. A great bottle of whiskey, and chocolates but he could find no knock-out drops. A sign on the door would have to do.

Dinner was delicious, shots came around three times, and a great time was had by all. Especially Claire who was toasted with each round by three men she now considered family. She did not think her life could be this good in a place as foreign to her as the moon. When a woman is truly happy she glows Jaime thought. His body was aching to have her and he encouraged the team to finish because he was exhausted. Claire’s mouth turned up slightly at the corners as Jaime stood up to answer his phone.

Claire looked around for Jaime after ten minutes and wondered who was calling. They were discussing the events tomorrow and Angus was reminding her of the issues with each horse. She looked for him again and tried to concentrate on Angus. It was another ten minutes before Jaime returned and he looked strange. Claire looked closely, “what happened?” Jaime was so conflicted it was driving him mad. “I just sold the last two horses guys,” 1-2-3 and..chaos, laughter, shouts went up as the table was pounded and shoulders were slapped. Jaime was laughing and shaking his head. “There is a Saudi group here, ken, representing the interests of some prince. They bought the first two earlier and were instructed to buy all four. At the asking price, except 65, at 10 grand under.” Rupert whistled through his smiles. “I have to meet these men at the barn to transfer ownership and
arrange for ..well everything. So we have to go.” He looked at Claire and winced but she smiled that she would wait.

Jaime walked Claire to her room and lost himself in her for five minutes. She had pulled the tape off her nipples in the darkness of the truck on the way back. Jaime’s hands caressed her stomach pushing the sweater steadily higher until he felt the naked swell of he breast. Claire almost lost her mind as she pressed her body into him, pulling him closer with her hands on his butt. Jaime groaned long and deep pulling her hair back to expose her neck, licking and sucking. Claire’s heart was about to pound right out of her chest, she couldn’t get close enough to him. Jaime finally pulled away and looked down at her trying to breathe. “Sassenach, I will be quick as I can, I promise, please wait for me.” She assured him she would be waiting and pushed him to the door, saying “hurry please, I need more of that.” Jaime found himself outside of her room and decided he would make the fastest deal in history. He grabbed the crutches from Angus and ran to his truck with his briefcase.

Claire turned on the television fantasizing about Jaime making love to her. She dozed on and off but the alcohol and the physical demands of the day finally pulled her under. She felt something crawling on her arms and fought her way to consciousness to scratch the area. So itchy she thought. Her eyes opened and she screamed until the air was completely gone in her lungs. Then she screamed again as she frantically pushed bugs off her arms and legs. She heard Rupert pounding on her door. “Lass, I hate to intrude but are ye alright?” Claire came flying out her door and held on to Rupert behind his back. Angus was at the other door, “what’s got into ye lass?” Claire was babbling about bugs on her and pointing at her room. Rupert pushed the door open and looked around but he didn’t see anything.

Claire was frantic, telling Rupert where to look and suddenly he jumped back looking horrified. “Bedbugs!” He grabbed Claire’s purse and shoved it at her when Angus let out a gasp, “bed bugs, God almighty! They’re all over the bed!” He hopped out of the room and clung to Rupert for support. All three of them were clinging to each other and slapping their arms and legs. Jaime came walking around the corner to see his team in some kind of weird huddle slapping themselves. He shook his head and started running when Claire shrieked his name. She jumped into his arms yelling “bed bugs!”

“We’re leaving,” Jaime said miserably.

The night clerk was informed of the infestation and she called the manager with shaking hands. Jaime asked for plastic trash bags and she gave him the whole box. Money was refunded and they were offered bottled water or soda every five minutes. They carried out bags of their belongings tightly knotted at the top and piled into their trucks and headed for Phoenix. Claire continued to swat at her arms for the first hour but finally snuggled into Jaime’s side and rested her head on his shoulder. She had never been this tired in her life she thought. Jaime just drove and the miles flew by with the empty trailer and his need pressing on the gas.

Claire’s head kept falling forward and she was getting cranky from fatigue. Jaime told her to lay on his lap and instantly regretted it. The pressure from her head and distance between her mouth and his cock was a new level of torture. He opened his window and stuck his head out hoping the change in sensation would calm him down. That helped take the edge off so he could sit back and press his speed up another ten miles per hour. He played his favorite music and played with her hair. It was so soft and full, her mouth was so soft and full, her breasts were so soft. Christ!

The little brown dog had not moved in two days, he no longer felt where his legs were and couldn’t lift his head. He dreamed about her smiling face kissing him and hugging him to her. It filled him with happiness to dream of running after his toys when she would throw them. Sleeping on her lap while she stroked him. He did not know he was dying, just that he could not stand up or lift his head.
He was just a puppy, after all, that had not eaten in five days and found little to drink. He had crawled under a bush in Claire’s front yard to watch for her. His slept through most of the last two days because his organs were shutting down and his little brain was essentially turning off. It was cold tonight and he shivered until that response shut down too. Every once in a while his brain would pull him to consciousness and he would look in the direction he was laying hoping to see her. In the deep cold night, the pup slipped into a coma and death would take him before the sun could offer any warmth.

The roar of Jaime’s truck split the quiet of the night and he helped Claire look for the bag with her purse and keys. Her hair was in her face and she kept trying to blow it away from her. Jaime looked at her leaning against the truck with her hands in a bag sound asleep. He chuckled and pulled her up to kiss him. His kiss got deeper and she pulled air into her lungs to feed her beating heart. Jaime broke the kiss and Claire’s happy voice said: “here they are, they were in my hand I guess.” Claire was beyond tired and wanted to go home and sleep. She knew dawn was coming and she felt safe. Jaime was in agreement, neither of them was ready for what he had in mind. He could wait one more day. Claire opened the door and flooded the front of the house with light. When she came back out she stopped dead. “Oh my God,” she breathed. She ran over to the bush and on her knees, she carefully pulled the pup to her. Her hand searched for a pulse and she got quickly to her feet carrying the dog inside. The poor thing was in a coma, from starvation by the looks of him. Claire laid him on the table and checked his capillarity response by pressing his gums. She felt it was too late but she would do all she could. She wrapped the pup in a blanket and placed a hot water bottle inside.

Jaime watched her assess the poor dog and wrap it up. His heart broke for the puppy. “Do you have emergency medical equipment for the horses? I need 5% glucose and a veinous kit. Do you have that?” Jaime told her yes but no catheters small enough for the pup. Claire stood up and looked at him with her heart bursting, she felt a love for him that seeped into every fiber of her being. She put her arms around him and hugged him close. Can you drive us to my truck Jaime? I don’t expect you to drive us to a vet hospital because you’re dead on your feet. But I have to try and save him. He kissed the top of her head and told her to grab the pup and he was driving. She grabbed a wad of paper towels and ran them soaking with water then put it in the pup’s mouth keeping his head down as they left the house.

There was only one emergency vet hospital close enough to count and they sat in the waiting room for ten minutes alone. The assistant checked them in and left them alone to wait. Claire pulled the pup to her and coo’ed softly in his ear but when she heard the shriek with laughter behind a closed door she lost it. Handing the dog to Jaime she pounded on the bell until the startled girl looked around the corner. “Come here.” When the girl was in front of her Claire looked her in the eyes and told her what she needed and what she would do if she didn’t get it NOW. She didn’t move fast enough so Claire came around the desk heading for the back room. The doctor was standing there with all she had asked for and an extra bottle of D5W and Pedialyte. She yanked a fifty dollar bill from her purse and slapped it into his hand and they left.

Jamie looked at his fierce Sassenach, “are they all owned corporately and how did ye ken such a thing?” It’s information that I read or heard that gets stuck up there in my head. Sometimes it is very handy. Most times it just clutters my head. It didn’t seem like the girl had the IQ to understand my threat but he certainly did. He was waiting in the back room with all this stuff.”

Claire hung the IV bag from a light fixture that hung down from the ceiling. The pup’s arm was shaved and she inserted the catheter and opened up the tube. She checked his gums and they had a quicker response time when she pressed on them. She listened to his heart and stood up to his open eyes. “Oh my God!” She came around the table so he could see her. “Hello,” she coo’ed. "Are you awake little pup?” She moved her finger in front of his face and he didn’t track. “Well, your heart sounds a bit stronger so that’s a win for us.”
She looked at Jaime who leaned against the wall with bloodshot eyes. “I have doctor’s orders for you too handsome, go home to bed while you can still get there.” He pressed his head to her forehead, “I have an agenda with you Sassenach. I want ye lass.” Claire smiled, “can I cook dinner for you tonight?” Jaime smiled remembering the last meal she cooked for him. “You can read my palm again if you want to.” He kissed her tentatively, “will ye sleep today a bit? My way of lovin is an endurance test, ye ken? If ye not rested ye won’t make it to the finals.” He was so tired he could hardly speak. Claire pulled him toward the door and to his truck. “Do you want me to drive you home?” She asked. Jaime squinted and pointed a finger, "it’s just right there I think.” She smiled and kissed him, “that’s right love.”

Claire watched the truck go down the road and prayed he would make it the rest of the way. When she walked in the kitchen the little tail was thumping on the table. She bent down in front of him, “hey! My little savior pup, I think you barked up a storm last week and chased away some bad men.” She ran her hand down his head and back and the tail thumped. Claire pulled up a chair and laid her head on her arms right in front of him. She had slept while Jaime drove home but she was still exhausted. The pup watched her intently but he too had heavy eyelids, and when she didn’t move away, he slipped under into rejuvenating sleep.

The sun rose in the sky and moved to its zenith plus two hours before Claire woke up. Her eyes opened and the tail was pumping the table. The pup moved his front legs to touch her. “Oh my goodness, look at you moving around. You waited until I woke up to show me that? You are my sweetheart!” Claire lowered her body onto the pup and kissed his face, pet his ears, and pulled him to her. She looked up at the bag that was almost empty. After taping his catheter to his arm and shutting down the flow, she disconnected the tubing. “I can’t imagine that table is very comfortable, why don’t we see you to a proper bed.” She scooped the pup into her arms and laid him on her bed piling blankets around him to keep in his body heat. “That’s a good little boy, I’m so proud of you for fighting your way back. I’ll see you well my little friend. Now rest”

The pup became so animated when Claire talked to him, moving his front legs and trying to see her. He still lacked the strength to lift his head but he kept trying. He could stay awake a minute or two longer each time she interacted with him. Claire knew that she had to get something into this dog or he would not make it to tomorrow. She grabbed her keys and walked to her truck making a fast trip to a PetSmart where she bought puppy milk, puppy chow, and special food for weaning pups. She also picked up a collar and had a tag made for him with her phone number. She picked out a bed for him that would accommodate his growing body and a leash. Now you have to live after I spent all this money, she thought.

Once home she transferred the pup to his new bedding and put a soft toy next to him. She spread newspaper for his food and water dish, talking softly to him while she moved around him. She bent over him so he could feel her all around him. Kissing his face and stroking his little body of bones. He was overwhelmed with the new items and smells and fell into a deep sleep.

Claire filled the tub with bubbles and a new razor and sank into warm bubbles. She stretched her tight muscles and thought about Jaime’s hand pushing her sweater up and covering her breast before grabbing her ass and pushing her into him. “Oh God, I don’t need a soak. Whatever I do need isn’t here.” She used a fresh razor to shave her legs, arms and… She remembered her female friends at her hospital talking about the sexual enhancement of going hairless. She couldn’t imagine at the time and still couldn’t but she wondered if she should be brave. She shaved everything between her legs except a half inch stripe. She looked at her body after her bath and decided she liked it very much.

With her hair dry and fluffy she pulled on low riding black flared pants and a cable sweater that stopped a little above her waistband showing an inch of her stomach and back all the times. She dabbed Opium between her shoulder blades and black strap sandals with a heal. She added the red
lipstick after remembering how Jaime stared at her mouth before her dressage test. Buckle up Jaime, she thought, I am coming for you. She stowed all pups equipment in a shoulder bag and carried him to her truck. He seemed scared when he couldn’t see her so she kept him close.

Claire let herself into Jaime’s house by the alarm. She put pup and his bed on the floor so he would see her if he woke up later while she was cooking. He had been awake for the whole trip over here so she laid on the floor, her eyes in front of his and told him a puppy story until he slipped into deep sleep.

She made a pan of lasagne from ingredients she bought on her trip to the store last week. She fried Italian sausage and chopped it up, looking up at the loft now and then hoping to see Jaime emerge. The last layer was in and Claire put the pan in the oven and cleaned up her dishes. She assembled a salad and put it in the frig. Her heart was beating faster and faster as her excitement grew. When the oven door closed she wiped her hands and went upstairs. She entered his room and saw him naked, deep in sleep, on his back, one hand on his chest. She could not look away but rather studied every inch of him from his toes to his muscled thighs, flat stomach, chiseled chest, and beautiful face. She pulled her shoes off and slid in next to him kissing his arm and caressing his stomach. He moaned her name.

Jaime turned his body into Claire wrapping her in a cocoon. He breathed deeply, “I dinna ken which smells better, ye or what is cookin, Sassenach.” She ran her hand up his back before slipping out from under him. She put her shoes back on as Jaime lifted his head and opened his eyes. “Wow, wait!” Claire had slipped away but not before Jaime saw skin, and shiny hair, and low riding pants. His stomach was growling and his dick was like granite. I'm comin for ye lass he thought.

Jaime stepped into the kitchen, hair still wet from the shower. The culinary smells were churning his stomach but seeing Claire with that exposed skin was churning his desire. “Jaime, sweetheart, sit and eat.” He sat down while his brain was scrambling with ‘did she just call me sweetheart?’ Claire put his plate on the table and kissed his cheek. Sitting next to him they ate the lasagne and salad. Claire filled him in on the pup’s recovery so far and what she had done to make him comfortable. Jaime thought about her two therapy horses and realized she had a huge capacity for love, more than anyone he had known before.

Claire looked at the pup and his eyes were open. She went to him and laid on the floor so he could see her. She stroked his back and talked to him while his tail pumped his bedding. She was telling him a puppy story and rolled on her back with her arm raised above her head so she could stroke his face. Jaime saw the love she had for this pup, and the sweater exposing her full stomach and part of her bra. He wanted that and his body moved toward it like a primordial directive. The pup had closed his eyes by then and he stood above her with his hand out. She took it and he lifted her into his arms kissing her deeply. His hands ran down her sides touching her soft skin. He kissed her to the couch and laid her down. On his knees, he lifted her sweater and kissed her stomach letting his tongue make circles on her skin and making her inhale sharply. He pushed her sweater up with his cheek, kissing and licking until he felt the lace of her bra. “Take it off” she breathed. He pushed her sweater over her head and looked at her upper body naked but for her bra. He looked at her face and her eyes were open, looking at him with need.

Jaime stood and brought back two glasses of the fine whiskey he bought yesterday afternoon. He had not said a word since that first kiss. He handed her a glass and filled his mouth from his own. He pulled the lace down from one breast and pulled a nipple into his mouth. He flicked her nipple and then swallowed the whiskey. He pulled her nipple into his mouth again and sucked hard until he heard Claire moan and felt her arch her back. He reached under her unclasping her bra and used his teeth to pull it off of her. There she was, naked from the waist up. He looked at her and felt his erection crash into the denim of his jeans. ‘You are the loveliest I have ever seen.” He pulled his shirt off making her gasp at the sight of his chest and abs. He pulled her up from the couch and she was
completely under his loving control. He looked at her lusty eyes and ran his hand down her back and cupped her ass. “My Sassenach wants somethin from me, aye?” Claire shook her head yes and brought his hand up to her breast. He kissed her deeply and felt her tongue slip into his mouth making him gasp and crush her to him. He picked her up and climbed the stairs quickly. His room was dark when he laid her on his bed. He went into the bathroom and came back with a candle that he lit on the bedside table. She laid there reaching for him and he laid next to her feeling the skin of her upper body on his. He ran his hand down her breast, stomach, and hips. She felt one button on her pants release then a deep kiss to captivate her mind. Another button released and he slid his hand under her waistband as deep as it would go. She felt another button release and then his mouth kissing her skin below her navel. Soft kisses as low as his mouth was allowed by her pants.

Claire was in sensory overload but wanted to stay there with him forever. Each level he took her to was just more of the most exquisite sensation. She touched him where she could reach but he seemed to be all over her body, flicking his tongue, sucking, and running his palm over her skin. She felt a hot need growing with every touch. When he released the last button of her pants he kissed the exposed skin and ran his tongue as low as it would go. Claire was moaning and pushed his hips to his mouth. “Oh my God,” she moaned and pulled his head to her mouth. His kiss was needy and demanding. “Sassenach.” Her hand felt for his button and released it. She pulled down his zipper as he kissed her. She was lost in an erotic fog and ran her hand under the denim and across his magnificent ass. He stood and let his jeans fall to the floor. She looked at him and gasped, reaching for him. He was enormous, and she wrapped her hand around him.

He pulled her hand away and she was pushing at her trousers. She called to him to make the throbbing stop. He loomed above her and she felt her pants slide off. She was naked and he was above her looking at her beautiful body. His eyes came up to hers and locked on as he lowered himself to her and she opened her legs. Their kisses were frantic and deep as he pulled up until his tip was right at her entrance. He was aware of his size being painful to a young lasses body and slid down until his mouth kissed her core. “Holy fuck! What are you doing?” She was completely under his spell and weak to protest anything he did. He watched her closely and dropped his head to her slipping his tongue into her fold for a split second. She arched her back and moaned. He did it a second and third time until she was panting. He opened her with his hands and pulled her throbbing core into his mouth. Claire was thrashing and calling his name so he flicked her clit over and over until she grabbed his head and pushed her pelvis against his mouth. She tumbled blissfully into a vortex of pure pleasure as her body jerked and gripped her. He came up and sucked her neck, licked her nipples and then seized her mouth. He felt her pelvis rise up searching for him. “Please,” she said. Jaime pushed into her and gasped as did she. He could not control his need any longer so he pushed into her and breathed into her ear, “open yer legs Sassenach, let me in.” Claire was pulling on his buttocks and moaning. When he pushed into her she called his name and pulled his mouth to her. She took possession of his mouth, holding his head to her she kissed him deeply. Jaime was losing his fight to go slow. She was so responsive to him and so wanting. She opened her legs as far as she could and pressed his butt to increase his depth.

He looked down at her feeling like he would explode any second. Her eyes were locked on his and she arched her back, “please, push love.” She pulled her legs up in the air at his sides and said, “pleeese.” Jaime thrust into her hitting her cervix and Claire cried out “don’t stop Jaime!” He rammed her over and over and stopped. She was still locked on to his eyes, moaning and pushing her pelvis toward him. “More, please, now, Jaime I am going to come now if you push, please.” That did it for him, his control was gone as this beautiful creature begged him to pound her. He held her pelvis up to him and drove himself into her again and again. He felt the squeeze of her internal muscles grip him in orgasm as she held him so tight and called his name. He growled and lost himself him pounding into her until he felt the overwhelming spasms in his core and pushed himself into her depths while he rode the wave of ecstasy.
They were wrapped into each other and struggling to breathe. His hand caressed her hair, her arms, and held her hips to him. He didn’t want to lose contact with her and pushed his nose into her neck. “My Sassenach,” he breathed. He pulled the quilt over them and they slept in their embrace.
Chapter 10

In the dead of night, Claire woke to a strange sound and quickly realized it was pup. She jumped out of bed and felt for her clothes until Jaime stirred. Fuck it, she ran downstairs and seeing Jaime’s shirt she wrapped it around herself and turned on a light. Pup’s tail was thumping and he was straining to see her. Claire laid down and curled around him. His front legs were touching her arms and she could see he was happy. “We need to get some calories into pup and you probably won’t like what I’m going to do but it will help you lift your head. Ok?” She kissed his face many times then got up to find supplies in her bag. She filled a needle-less syringe with Pedialyte and some baby food and put a drop on pup’s tongue. To Claire’s surprise, his tongue pushed forward a bit so he could swallow. “Well, look at you!” She said excitedly. “Let’s try it again.” The tail was thumping and he swallowed again. This went on for ten minutes until pup was worn out. Claire looked at the syringe. “Five cc’s. It’s a good start but it won’t help you fast enough I’m afraid.” Knowing he was deep in sleep she carried him upstairs and placed his bed on the floor so he could see her when he woke up. Claire snuck in bed quietly and was shivering from the cold. Jaime pulled her to him and lent his heat as his hands roamed her naked body. His hands felt so good to her, warm and exploring. She yawned deeply and he pulled her head under his chin. They slept.

Jaime woke in the predawn minutes as he always did and looked at Claire next to him. She was sleeping on her side so he spooned her running his hand up her leg, stomach, and breast. He was aching with need as thoughts of the night before filled his head. He pinched her nipple and Claire gasped and felt Jaime lift up her leg and scratch her inner thighs with his whiskers. Soft and wet he probed and stimulated until Claire was panting for him. He left her on the edge and brought himself up to suck her nipples. She opened her legs and pulled him toward her. He eased into her warmth and both moaned. Slowly he pulled almost completely out of her body before driving himself into her. Claire’s arms held him so tight and she said two words over and over, “Jaime” and “more.” She pushed her pelvis up to meet him, her body was shaking with need. Jaime pulled out and pushed her over the edge with his tongue. He pushed into her while she was still in the grips of her orgasm and felt the lovely muscles inside her grip him. It was more than he could take and he rammed into her over and over until he came deep inside her.

Jaime held Claire’s head and kissed her again and again. The dawn was just breaking and they both heard a whispered ‘ruff’. Jaime looked around for the sound and Claire started laughing. “Look at you pup, you’re trying to bark!” She slid out of bed and laid naked where he could see her. His tail pumped and she noticed his back legs twitch when he moved his front feet. “Oh my God! You’re moving your back legs, you clever pup!” She buried his face in kisses making his little body wiggle in every direction.

Jaime watched them smiling. “Well, laddie, ye hit the jackpot with yer mistress there.” He watched Claire’s naked body roll to her back arms over her head telling a puppy story. Jaime felt his heart beat only for her. When she reached for the pup’s paw and her breasts shook and he watched intently. He dropped on top of her and held her wrists together while the other hand made a formal request. She gazed at him feeling his hand slide down her inner thigh and touch her so softly. I want ye again Sassenach but my body canna yet. So it’s time for coffee.

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Jaime reached for the shirt she wore last night and handed it to her. With his lips to her ear, he asked for her company in the shower. His voice sent electric shocks through her down to her toes and she could hardly catch her breath. Jaime got up and went down to the kitchen. Claire followed and took the syringe she made during the night into the microwave. She could not stop looking at him because he was naked and very uninhibited. When he caught her looking she blushed madly. Claire added
more of the baby food and shook the mixture. She walked to the staircase and watched him for a
long moment. When Jaime turned around she looked away and ran to the pup. Ten minutes later he
brought her a cup of coffee and saw pup was well into his meal.

Jaime turned on the shower and stood under the three heads until he felt his muscles relax. Claire
snuck in and was shivering behind him. Jaime’s arm scooped her to him and he kissed her deeply
again and again while the water poured down on them. Claire rubbed soap all over his torso and
played with the lather. She ventured lower and spread the soap from his waist to his knees. He was
big even when he wasn’t erect and she wanted to taste him but lacked the nerve. He pulled her up to
him and covered her in soap then she felt his strong hands work shampoo into her hair and massage
her scalp. This was heaven on earth she decided.

Claire was so amazed he could be gentle, sexy, strong, and decisive. The man who rinsed her hair
and gave her three orgasms in one night is the same man who killed at least one of her attackers. She
was happy every minute he was with her and she wanted to be everything he desired. But how? As
the water was turned off she decided to find some coaching. The internet could be anonymous, she
would try that first.

A kiss goodbye and each went separate ways. Claire and pup returned to her house and she made an
appointment with a veterinarian that was close. An hour later, Dr. Speck examined pup, collected
urine and blood, and provided a weight enhancement supplement. “When his kidneys start working I
think you will see rapid improvement, including the use of his legs and lifting his head. Claire was
extremely relieved and so happy for the pup but she couldn’t stop her mind from wandering back to
Jaime.

She worked on her application to the medical board of Arizona but found herself daydreaming most
of the time. She fed pup each time his eyes opened and then tried to work again. She gave up and
flipped open her laptop. She searched for sexual positions, sexual massage, and what men like. It
was all fascinating reading but not what she wanted. Finally, ‘oral sex’ and Google became her best
friend. There were pages and pages of text and video. Claire watched the video’s and felt her
temperature shoot up, as well as her heartbeat. Having never watched or read pornography she
quickly found herself tied up in knots and sexually needy.

Jaime picked up the phone and heard the best voice he could hope for. “Sassenach, how is your day
going?” Claire forced herself to make small talk as her hand pressed her nipple through her shirt. She
gave up trying to be normal. “If you have a few moments today sometime can you run over here?”
Her voice sounded different and she was breathing differently. “What’s amiss lass?” She was nearly
panting listening to his voice. “Ah, everything is good but if you need a break I would like to show
you something. Nothing earth shattering so don’t worry if you’re busy.” He wasn’t alarmed by her
voice, he just knew it was different. “I’ll be up in a bit.” Claire hung up the phone “thank God!”

Claire poured a whiskey and then set two glasses and the bottle on her coffee table. She paced back
and forth in the great room because sitting made it worse. She pulled her hot hair into a ponytail and
changed into her lounging pants and a muscle shirt tied up at the waist. Her pants rode low on her
hip leaving tons of skin exposed to cool her off. She was still sweating. Why the hell is it so hot in
here? She went back to the laptop and watched another instructional video and almost had an orgasm
sitting there.

Jaime knocked and the lid slammed shut on the laptop. Claire answered, breathless, trying to act
normal but was stuck looking at this gorgeous man. He looked at her closely and let himself in
walking around her. She closed the door and he pulled her to him. “I’ve missed ye Sassenach.” Now
that he was here she didn’t know how to start. People don’t put there face in a person’s crotch
normally so how could she get in the right position to start doing it. Jaime watched her mind work
while she stared at his body. “Sassenach, how has yer day been?” She jerked her head up, “Hmm?”
She walked to the couch and poured whiskey, then she drank it, leaving Jaime at the door. He could
see she was wrestling with something and worked to keep from laughing because she was so
obvious. “Is one of those for me?” Claire looked up at him, “Jesus! Come sit with me. How is your
day going.” Why didn’t the video show how to get it started? Jaime could not hold it in anymore and
started laughing. He held her head and kissed her softly. “Perhaps you will share what’s on your
mind lass.” When Claire poured another glass for them she swallowed in one gulp. Jaime was seeing
a different side of Claire. She was timid and quiet but obviously thinking hard about something.

Claire stood up quickly and somehow lost her balance almost falling backward. She laughed and
asked Jaime to come in her room while blowing the hair out of her face. She felt so completely out of
her element and feared she drank too many shots waiting for him. He watched her closely with a
smile on his face. Claire stood still because the floor was moving and tried to say something he
couldn’t understand. “C’mon Jaimery.” He pulled her into his lap and kissed her hard. “Are ye drunk
lass?” He ran his hand under her shirt and twisted her nipple. “Of course,” she said indignantly and a
minute later remembered the “not.”

Jaime carried her to the bed and laid her down. She said “this will work good but you have pants on.
So…” Jaime watched her, wishing he could make her talk to him about what was on her mind. He
slid up next to her and spoke quietly in her ear. She moaned, “fats… sats…thats!…is what I meant to
say. That’s, um hum. I was comin to ride Fred and um the other horse but I watched some videos,
educational vid..” She dissolved in giggles. “So.. the pants must come off.” She grabbed his belt and
pulled before slipping it from the belt loop. Jaime didn’t help her, but he cleared his throat a lot to
keep from laughing. “Claire, what kind of videos did ye watch?” She flashed her beautiful smile,
“sex videos” she whispered. Jaime was helpless to understand what would make this smart
accomplished woman drink too much whiskey in the middle of the afternoon and watch sex videos.
He watched her slide into sleep, pass-out was more accurate. He pulled a blanket up and kissed her
cheek.

On his way out he lifted her laptop and checked her search history. The videos were instructional
and he couldn’t believe his eyes. He played the most recent and watched the proper execution of a
blow-job. He held his breath to keep from laughing out loud and waking her. “Oh my God, ye goofy
lass” he whispered. He cleaned up the whiskey and glasses and went back to work, smiling and
shaking his head.

Laoghaire hugged the phone and shot dirty looks at the line of women behind her. She was pleading
with her girlfriend to find a way to bail her out of jail. Her circle of friends knew her family was very
rich and so far no one wanted to risk their car or house to raise bail if her father wouldn’t do it.
Laoghaire maintained she was innocent and her friends accepted this because the crime was too
heinous to believe. Laoghaire screamed into the phone to come and bail her out, today! She slammed
the phone down and stalked off. Tears ran down her face in frustration. She absolutely had to get out
of this fucking jail. If she could get Jaime alone he would see the mistake he made and make it all up
to her. She circled around and got back in line to make another call.
Chapter 11

Claire woke up at five in the evening. She was disoriented and couldn’t remember much about the afternoon. She swung her legs to the ground and sat up, instantly grabbing her head. “Oh Christ, what did I do?” Pup! She thought and ran to find him soaking wet and shivering, trying to bark. When he heard her voice his tail was thumping. “Oh, my sweet pup, I am so sorry. Look at you shake, poor thing, your freezing! Look at all the urine you made. What a good dog!” His body was wiggling, trying to touch her, but he was so happy, as always, when Claire was near. “I have to get a towel to warm you up.” She dashed to her linen closet and pulled out a stack of towels. On her way back she stopped dead in her tracks. It was shaky to be sure, but the pup’s head came up and he looked around the room. “Oh my God! My pup!” She wrapped herself around him and kissed him over and over again. His head was back on his bed but this was progress.

Claire got the pup cleaned up, smelling good, dry and warm. She added more meat baby food and the supplement given by her veterinarian. This time she needed to get at least 30 cc’s into him and hoped he would do it without a stomach tube. The mixture was warm and smelled good. She pulled his mouth up on one side, stuck the syringe between two teeth and squirted toward the back of his tongue. His tongue came out as he swallowed and then licked the syringe for more. It was a huge breakthrough day for him. He can pee, lift his head, and eat. She was beaming at him.

Jaime tried to work but his thoughts kept returning to Claire watching oral sex video’s. He would smile and shake his head. He needed to find a way to help her. He was still on his sexual best behavior not wanting to chase her out the door by making the wrong move. He could only hope she would ask him or figure it out before she needed a 12-step meeting. Or, he could get her so hot she didn’t care anymore. Jaime’s smile was wicked, yes that is much more fun, he decided. “Look out Lass, I’m takin ye to the stars tonight.” As he was leaving his cell phone started ringing.

Claire was twisting a towel on her head after a shower when she heard the doorbell. Wrapped in a terry cloth robe she saw the red hair through the peephole and opened the door. Jaime regarded her bare long legs, short robe, and shiny face. She jumped into his arms and he caught her with one of them, the other held an enormous bouquet of roses, babies breath, and citrus branches, and smelled like heaven. Claire squealed and ran to the kitchen to find a vase. Hopefully, the old owner kept one of those somewhere.

“Jaime, did I fall asleep when you were here earlier? That is so odd for me, and rude I might add. I’m sorry.” She placed the huge flowers on her table and admired them. Jaime cleared his throat, “Sassenach, ye have cooked for me and tended the pup non-stop for two days, ye saved the show last weekend, and helped me when I fell. I have been remiss in showing my appreciation, ye ken? If ye will accompany me, I would like to show ye something magical. He pulled her close and kissed her softly letting his hand slip into her robe and touch her warm skin. “let me taste ye Sassenach.” She slipped her tongue into his mouth to dance softly with his own and Jaime moaned into her open mouth.

“Okay, I accept!” She ran to her room and slipped on skinny jeans, boots, a long sleeve ribbed shirt, no bra, and a jacket. Her hair was still wet but she didn’t want to spend the time drying it. She was excited, her heart was racing and she wanted to spend every minute next to Jaime on this adventure. When she walked out her breath caught and she stopped to watch Jaime stretched out in front of pup stroking his head and back. Pup’s head was resting in Jaime’s huge hand. It was the sweetest thing and her heart melted. Jaime was talking quietly about the picnic he planned for them and how lucky they were to spend the evening with his beautiful Sassenach. He got up and picked up the bed and dog. Claire’s relief was making her eyes sting and she raced around the kitchen getting his food
She had to sit very close to him because of all the stuff on the seat and floor. “Why not put some of the stuff in the bed?” Jaime ran his hand down her legs, “I don’t want it to fall out.” Every red light was a long heated kiss that left them both panting. “There it is, Silly Mountain.” It looked to Claire like someone just dropped this single peak mountain in the desert. Jaime put the truck in four-wheel drive and turned into a dirt road that wound around the mountain to the top. The sun was setting in a typical Arizona sky of bright orange, pink, purple and blue. It was magnificent. “Stay here for a moment while I get dinner ready, aye?” Claire smiled brightly, “dinner?” He pulled out the large basket and two blankets, and a Coleman lantern. Two minutes later he pulled her out of the car and kissed her deeply. He was hungry for her but he had to take extra time tonight. Claire was breathing in his ear and Jaime ran his hands up her back. No bra, he winced, she would put his slow burn to the test tonight.

Claire was enchanted and turned in a circle looking at the valley spread out far below and all around them. “Oh, my God, Jaime I have never seen anything so beautiful. The lights twinkled below them like a million diamonds sparkling. She saw a helicopter in the distance and realized they were at the same altitude as the craft. Jaime popped a CD into the truck player. He assembled the playlist when he first got the picnic idea. Love songs, in every flavor, with lyrics that spoke of his growing love for her. They danced close and slow and he lavished her with kisses and pulled her close to feel his growing need. “Are ye hungry Sassenach?”

While the music played soft and sweet, they watched the activity below them and ate fried chicken out of a bucket. When Jaime could stand it no more he pressed her to the blanket and pulled hungry kisses from her. “Sassenach, I can barely concentrate at work thinkin about ye. I see memories of pulling yer legs open this morning so I could lay my tongue alongside ye, where ye throb, or inside ye and watch back arch.” Claire was breathing heavy with memory. Jaime touched her briefly and sent an erotic shock through her core and down to her feet. She wanted those hot kisses and chased his mouth. “Pull her hair down lass.” It was not a request and Claire felt goosebumps erupt on her arms. Jaime’s hand gripped her hair paying close attention for push back. He pulled her hair back bringing her face up to meet his hungry mouth. Claire’s eyes suddenly went wide, eyebrows shot up. “Jesus H Roosevelt Christ!” She looked up at a black sky filled with a million diamonds twinkling brightly. He pushed her down to the blanket and laid beside her. It’s difficult to talk when you take in the incredible night sky deep in the desert. The billions of lights and shooting stars have a muting effect on everybody. “Oh my God!” She breathed. Jaime was thrilled to be the first one to show her this amazing night sky. Claire’s eyes danced through the stars and darted to catch the trail of an occasional shooting star. She would make a wish on each one she saw and they were all about the fine man beside her. She shivered and Jaime pulled her close and wrapped himself around her.

Claire had so many emotions boiling inside of her but one memory was percolating to the top. The video! The memory of the tutorial filled her mind and it seemed so easy now. She pushed herself up while pushing Jaime to the blanket. She captured his mouth and sent a bold statement with her tongue. ‘I will have my way with you, I’m hungry’. Her hands were everywhere and Jaime was groaning deep in his chest. The wind was chilly so she did not unbutton his shirt but she kissed him from neck to stomach while caressing his erection. This was spectacularly arousing to her. Leading the foreplay was hot and she was about to put her lips around him. It was all she could do not to grab his belt and zipper and begin.

Jaime was using all his strength to let Claire explore and find her own way to him. He worried he would explode before she got his zipper down. He conjured up dung piles left by large dinosaurs, hot maggots, and other disgusting images. It was little help so he just laid still.
Claire was lost in the moment. She had so many sensations sparkling inside her. She pulled his shirt tail out and licked his stomach and belly button. Jaime’s hand grabbed her hair and quickly released it. She moved down and pulled his belt until she heard and felt it pop out of the restraining hole. Mmmm, this is so erotic, she thought, thank God for video tutorials. She caressed him and brought her hand to his zipper which got stuck halfway down. She opened her eyes to find the catch and her scream shattered the quiet night as she scrambled to her feet hopping from one to the other. Jaime was swimming through an erotic pool of pure sensation when Claire’s scream injected high octane adrenaline directly into his heart and loins. He jumped to his feet and pulled her against his chest but she fought him like a ninja pushing him away. She just kept screaming and pointing at his crotch. Could it be so ugly, he thought? “Biggest spider I have ever seen in my whole life is on your pants Jaime!” He looked down and saw nothing until hairy legs at least six inches long and a body the size of her fist came racing around his hip into view. Claire screamed again. Jaime wanted to crush the thing under his foot for what it cost him but decided she could do without that horrific image. He grabbed a leg and tossed the thing into the abyss. Suppose I’ll just stuff the shirt tail and zip it up then, he decided. Claire was shaking so hard Jaime could barely hold on to her. Her head was whipping from one foot to the other looking for the giant thing. Jaime let out a long breath and walked her to the truck but she wouldn’t get in until he used the interior light to check her for crawling spiders. “Yer all clear Sassenach. Look, Pup’s head is up lookin for ye.” Ye best calm him down, aye?” He pushed everything into the picnic basket and stowed it in the bed. It couldn’t fall out going down.

In the high beams of the truck, he looked for anything left behind and noticed two other large tarantulas running through the rocks. They looked horrifically scary but rarely bit people. When they did, it hurt. He pushed into the truck and Claire’s hand came up, “stop?” He froze. Turn around please. Holding his arms up he stepped back and turned slowly. “Okay, hurry and get in!” He closed the door and tried to pull her to him but she had pulled Pup’s bed onto her lap and had both hands on him transferring her jarring shake into him. Jaime spoke into her ear while pulling the bed and dog onto the seat and finding her seat belt. “It’s alright mo chaileagan milis. Yer alright.” Claire looked at him with wide eyes. “I opened my eyes and it put two feet on me like it was going to climb on my face!” Jaime’s heart sank with her continued shaking. He started the engine and dropped it in drive. Tarantula=1 : Jaime=0.
Chapter 12

Claire laid in bed and thought about Jaime, Arizona, sex tapes, and tarantulas. Her new life was like a move to mars and a bit overwhelming at times. She smiled seeing Jamie’s face in her mind and remembered the awesome night sky. He was sweet and handsome and knew just how to touch her. That damn spider. It ruined everything. Claire would find a way to make it up to him.

She heard a tail pounding the floor and looked over the side of her bed into happy brown eyes. Pup was humping, for lack of a better term. He could not bark yet and when he tried it sounded like ‘hup’. She smiled at his adorable face."Do you need to pee my little pup? My goodness, you are getting big from all that food!” Claire got up and made her bed, a habit impossible to break. When she threw the pillows at the headboard, that was pup’s cue to turn in circles and hup because the next thing to happen is the door would open and he could bound outside. Which is exactly what happened.

Claire sipped coffee and watched pup hup at the birds chasing him. If he wandered into one corner of the yard Doves would swoop down and peck him in the butt. It looked painful but he usually went there first. She smiled and shook her head.

She spent the next hour reading her journals and thinking of Jamie. Her eyes were running down the sentences but she couldn’t remember the last words she read. She turned the page and remembered kissing his stomach and tasting his skin. Pulling his shirttail out of his pants was so thrilling. She was so close to putting her mouth around him. Her eyes were closed and she was smiling. Maybe later, she thought. Her eyes popped open and she looked into the smiling face of Frank Randall. What?!

Claire jumped back from her seat, “Christ!, what are you doing here!” She backed up until she was pressed against the refrigerator. Her wide eyes saw his mouth asking why she was in her pajamas at ten o’clock in the morning. “Where is your list of goals for this week?” he asked. “Why haven’t I seen your post-surgical notes on Mrs. Harold yet? When were you planning to tell me about moving to Arizona Claire?” She was heaving for air and needing to get away from him but she knew he would grab her and something awful would follow. Her hand felt the drawers behind her as he shouted at her to answer him! She pulled a drawer open and grabbed a carving knife. She held it in front of her and told him to shut his mouth. His face twisted into an ugly smile that meant sure trouble for her. “Fortunately for me dear Claire you don’t have the backbone to use that.” Claire raced forward and plunged the knife into the center of his face. “Ha, you lose a face you prick.” She picked up the journal and looked at the stabbed face of someone she hated. She felt her anger coming to the surface and it was huge.

Claire paced her great room trying to calm down. The Arizona Claire, strong, independent, and fearless was suddenly overcome by a picture of a monster who controlled her the last four years in Boston. “Fuck you, Frank! You think I’m weak and spineless, watch this you prick.” She was about to show the world how strong she was by driving up Silly Mountain.

The dirt road was too small for a truck she decided and drove around the base twice before deciding this was it. Claire was in an ‘anything you can do I can do better’ mood and gripped the steering wheel as she inched up the dirt path. She was less than a foot from the mountain on her left side, all she saw out the passenger window was air. She continued slowly until the path twisted sharply. If I try that I will drive right off the mountain she figured. She stared at the turn until she felt sweat dripping down her face. Christ it’s hot in here. She pushed her power windows down and the cool
air was such a relief. The tarantula suddenly popped into her mind and she pounded the window button until it closed. Fuck!

Claire was covered in sweat and she had to make a decision. She picked up her cell phone and called Rupert. “Ye where?” She would have given a kidney not to tell him, “I am stuck on Silly Mountain in my truck. I can’t go up or down because, well just because. Can you come over here and drive my truck for me? Please?” Claire rolled her eyes and made her voice crack a little, “I don’t know what to do, I’m so scared.” She could almost feel Rupert stand-up straighter, “dinna worry lass, I am comin to get ya. Dinna be scarit.” Before he could click of she said: “don’t tell Jamie!”

“Claire, you are the worse human being ever,” she said out loud. She was very relieved help was on the way. She would tell Jamie all about it and suffer the humiliation but not until his clinic was over. Claire looked at the back window and then at her hips and shoulders. She decided to try and crawl through the window before she passed out from the heat. It was fairly easy to get her upper body out but she did not consider the size of her rump which by Jaime’s definition was lusciously fat. It took her five minutes to admit she was stuck. “Well lassie, yer in a fine mess are ye no?” Claire’s head jerked up at Rupert’s smiling face. She glared at him, daring him to laugh, which he did until tears ran down his face.

“If you’re quite finished Rupert!” She snapped. “Please take my hands and pull.” Rupert pulled and looked at the rump in the window. “Can lasses hold them in, like ye stomach, aye?” Claire’s face was beat red and she was ready to choke him to death. She put her hands to the glass and pushed as hard as she could. When she popped out she fell hard on her back. “hey, ye did it.” Rupert was smiling at her when she looked up at him.

Finally, on her feet, she asked Rupert to please back the truck down the mountain and she would help him stay on the path. Rupert’s smile dropped off his face, “I canna fit through that window lass, nor climb through the side window, I willna fit.” Claire’s eyes went wide, “what? Now what are we going to do?” Rupert picked up his cell phone, “Angus, ye need to come to Silly Mountain and drive Claire’s truck down, it’s stuck. I think ye better hurry, the lass doesna look well. And she says don’t tell Jaime.”

Claire sat on the tailgate thinking she would rather hold a tarantula than live through this nightmare. God she was hot. At least she was lucky to be wearing shorts. She rolled them higher on her legs for more air. “Hey look Rupert, I’m getting a tan!” She pointed to the line on her leg from where the shorts were. She looked up at Rupert who was trying to smile and nod but mostly looking like he wanted to jump off the mountain.

Angus came around the path breathing hard and looking murderous. He looked at Claire and jumped back looking horrified. “Okay, wer gettin ye out of the sun right now.” He jumped into the bed of the truck and squeezed into the driver’s seat through the side window. Rupert held his palm over Claire’s head until she batted it away. Angus started the truck, dropped it in reverse, and almost lurched off the mountain. Claire was screaming and waving her hands, Rupert grabbed his chest and Angus crossed himself, three times. “Jesus! This must be a big motor!”

They tried over and over to get the truck down but they finally locked it up and walked back down to give Claire a lift home. When she sat in Rupert’s honda it felt like she sat on fire. “Jesus Rupert! What is on your seat that’s so hot?” Rupert tried to smile, “it’s ye legs lass, ye got a bit sunburned today.” Claire thought the misery would never end and got into the car gingerly.

Rupert knew Jaime was going to kill him and Angus too most likely. He would try to bargain for his life. Go back to Scotland and never come to America again. It might work. The clinic was over and Jaime was pissed. He came at Rupert, “what happened to ye today? I was alone for the last two
hours with no help. Ye knew I had the clinic so what made ye run out of here like that. And where’s Angus he growled. Jaime’s face was inches from Rupert’s, “well?!”

“Claire.”

“What?”

“She needed help, poor lass”

“What?”

“She asked me to help her get the truck down from Silly Mountain.”

“What!”

“She was stuck halfway out of the window, her um, well it got stuck. I tried to pull the lass out but she did it…with…her…” Jaime’s face looked incredulous. Nothing Rupert said made sense, and he really needed to hit something.

There were boarders coming toward the barn and Jaime grabbed Rupert and pulled him into the office. “Again.” Rupert explained what happened to the three of them and mentioned Claire had a bit of a sunburn. Jaime sat back in his chair wondering why she would even want to go up there. It was preposterous and very dangerous. He shook his head to clear it. “I’m leavin and yer not.” He stood and left.

Claire almost fainted when she saw her reflection. Her skin was almost purple making the whites of her eyes look startling. She smeared a thick layer of burn cream over all the burned skin and then couldn’t sit down on anything. She stood in the middle of the room feeling miserable. When Jaime knocked she nearly jumped out of her skin.

Jaime was not a reactive man. He preferred to keep a calm mask on his face and deliberate in his mind. Sometimes, even he will lose his composure. “Jesus Christ Claire, ye look like a puffy lobster!” She looked at the ground and tried to run to her room and slam the door. Jaime caught her and brought her within a few inches but couldn’t find any skin not covered in creamy white burn medication. He bent down and kissed her carefully. “I’m gonna get whiskey for us and ye can tell me about yer day.” Jaime came back and handed her a glass. “I would rather not.” Jaime sat on the couch and smiled at her “I insist.”

Claire told him about Frank’s picture in her journal and how she heard all his insults and taunting, then she stabbed him and then wanted to do something to show she wasn’t what he said she was. I didn’t know it would be so hard to get up there.

Jaime was not expecting her answer. He didn’t really know what to expect, but not that. “I’m sorry lass,” he said so quietly. “I’m sorry he treated you that way, I’m sorry you were mad enough to stab him and defiant enough to drive up that mountain.” He felt wretched. He couldn’t hold her as he wanted and he couldn’t erase her abusive history with Frank. He settled on trying to help her with the pain.

“Ye have nothing to fear lass, I’ll get ye truck down, but first, let’s have a look at ye pool.” Claire’s head jerked up, “my what?” Jaime guided her to the back door walked her around to the pool. He brought a chair with him and motioned her into the water. “You want me to go swimming, now?” Jaime nudged her toward the first step in the water. “Just sit on the edge there and put ye feet in the water. It’s really cold but it will take the sting away.” Claire put her feet on the step and sat down. She dropped her lower legs into the cold water and sighed. It was the first moment of relief since she
got home. She dribbled water down her burned arms and tried to stop Pup from licking it off.

Jaime’s head was reeling over what she said about Frank. She skirted his questions about her life in Boston and then all of a sudden it all came out. He believed she was miserable enough at the moment but he would bring it up again in case she needed help with Dr. Frank Randall.

Jaime left to pick up dinner for them and Claire cried her eyes out. She felt better by the time Jaime sat on the astroturf and spread out a picnic she could eat in the pool. Jaime told her about the horses he bought and when they would arrive. One of them would make a good eventing horse and he asked if she had shown eventing before. Claire knew other riders that did eventing. It’s the triathlon for equestrians, three days of hard riding, and it’s not for the meek she remembered. “There are video’s on Google you could watch to see if wanted to try it.” He touched her cheek, “I’ll have to hire a rider if this horse is as good as I think he is, it’s where we make the most money, ye ken.” Let me know what ye think Sassenach.

Over the next three days, Claire watched hours of eventing video while her skin recovered. Jamie’s next group of green horses arrived, plus two new client horses, so he was busy. When they were together, Jaime could not keep his hands off of Claire so they agreed to a three-day break while she healed. The absence of her would forever be a reminder to him that he couldn’t live without her.

It was day three and Jaime watched Angus in the outside arena with one of the new horses. He looked up in Claire’s direction and wanted to see her more than his next breath. Three days without her was tough. He saw her truck pull out and turn toward his house. He smiled at her and noticed her face was almost back to normal. She promised to make lasagne to celebrate being together again. He strained his eyes trying to see her but only made out a Levi jacket and bags of food as she carried them in.

Claire spent the afternoon getting ready for their date tonight. She was so excited to see Jaime and could not wait to melt into him and cover him in kisses. She blew her hair fluffy with curls at the end and applied a little makeup. She wanted sexy tonight and stared at her clothes. Pup only hupped at one thing she showed him so the decision was made. She tied her purple halter under her hair and wrapped a soft cotton skirt around her like a sarong. The skirt reminded her of the desert sunsets and she loved it. “Good choice Pup,” she said walking to the kitchen to pack everything up. When she stepped into Jaime’s house his scent hit her and she smiled. With a pan of lasagna cooking and a fresh salad in the frig the minutes became hours and she paced. When the door finally opened they locked eyes for a split second and then she jumped into his arms wrapping her legs around his waist. They couldn’t get close enough and their kisses were deep and frantic. She finally pulled away and looked into his gorgeous eyes, “I’ve missed you.”
Jaime handed Claire a glass of whiskey. They sat on the couch while dinner cooked and talked about the three days they were apart. Jaime touched her skin which had turned a golden brown he let his hand rest on her thigh before sliding down her leg. He pulled her legs up onto his lap and took her sandals off. Jaime refilled their glasses and sat a little closer this time. He looked into her eyes and slid his hand up her inner thigh, hearing her gasp when he ran out of leg. “I know somethin about ye Sassenach. Ye canna hide it from me. Ye want me to touch ye, and ye want to touch me too. Don’t ye Sassenach.” He looked at her halter top with the deep V in front. “Show it to me mo chridhe, let me see what ye want me to touch.” He was staring at her nipples poking through the thin fabric. Claire slipped her finger inside the fabric and pushed it to the side exposing her breast. “Drink yer whiskey lass, and hand me the glass,” his voice was husky with desire. He kissed her senseless pushing her down on the couch. Then he took the bare breast in his mouth and sucked hard causing her to gasp. “I missed ye so much I don’t think I can wait for dinner lass.” He picked her up and carried her up to his room.

He hugged Claire and untied the two knots that held her halter top on. Then he untied her sarong. He was speechless at the tiny panties she wore, high on her hips and dipping to her pubic bone. She pulled his shirt tail out and unbuttoned it slowly, pushing it off of him. She grabbed his belt and popped his jeans, then she lowered the zipper slowly while looking in his eyes. Christ, lass, ye beautiful. He kissed her deeply and Claire’s heart was ramming in her chest. “Ye can wait for me here, or join me in the shower?” Before she could answer he grabbed her hand and made for the shower.

Jaime spread a ton of soap on her skin, letting his fingers slide across her breasts and tease her nipples. It was a highly charged, erotic shower, and they were both ready to explode. Claire soaped Jaime and felt the massive muscles under her fingers. She ran soapy hands down his legs, balls, and cock. She dropped to her knees and held his erection for a few seconds, and slipped it into her mouth. “Ah, God Sassenach, that is heaven for sure but I will’na last wi’ye doin that.” He pulled her up and she wrapped her legs around him kissing him deeply. He lowered her onto his erection and Claire moaned and tried to push against him. “Show me how to move Jaime.” Said into his open mouth. “Next time.”

Jaime dried Claire’s skin and wrapped her hair in a towel. He picked her up and laid her on his bed. Lift yer legs and bend yer knees. She did and Jaime pushed her knees apart and looked at her. In one move he was on top of her and pushing into her with a gasp. He would stop suddenly and push down to slide his tongue against her heat. Claire was out of her mind with need and squirmed under him. The third time he stopped she begged him to continue and he licked her to the edge and over the top. He watched her face ride the pleasure vortex. When she opened her eyes he kissed her and rammed into her, pressing her still throbbing core. “Give me yer tongue Sassenach.” He fused his lips to hers and sucked her tongue into his mouth while his body pounded into hers. He climaxed with a growl in her ear and then collapsed to her side.

He looked at the face he adored and said: “no more absences, my heart canna take the reunion.” He wrapped her up for a cuddle and told her everything he loved about her body making Claire giggle when he got to her ass.

They gorged themselves on lasagne and fell into bed exhausted. There was no moon in the sky and the outside lights were turned off. When Jaime turned off the light Claire couldn’t believe how absolutely black the room was. “I don’t think I have ever seen this level of dark before. I can’t even see your outline Jaime.” She felt warm arms pull her to him. “Let me remind ye where I am lass.”
Jaime slept in a sea of emotions that made him feel happy and view the world as a beautiful place. In the deep night, he felt small hands on his face and her mouth on his. Lacking the primary sense of sight heightened her touch. He took a deep breath and brought his hands up to hold her to him. She continued her long soft kisses and he kissed her back. Her next kiss was just as soft and he felt her tongue touch his lips for just a moment. He would wait until his body blew away as dust to feel her lips press his again. He was spellbound. She pressed her lips to his again and he felt her soft tongue come into his mouth and dance with his.

When he heard her deep breathing again he let himself sleep and dove back into that happy emotional sea. It was sometime later he felt her body pressed to his and her kisses on his neck. He issued a directive to his loins to behave which was promptly ignored. Her soft tongue slid up his neck from his collar bone and he breathed deeply trying to calm down. She had pressed them into a twisted configuration with interlocked limbs that felt so good. Claire lifted her leg over his hip and pulled him to her letting her body pull him in. “God, lass.” He remained still and Claire moved away from him and back again. Her small gasps as he filled her went straight down his spine and erupted in dozens of sparklers in his balls. It was magical for Jaime but Claire stopped moving and put her forehead against his cheek. “It’s not working.” He heard the frustration in her whisper. He moved his hands to her buttocks and slowly moved her away, “what’s not working love?” He pulled her to him a little faster and pressed himself into her. “Ah!” Tell me sweet love” he pushed her out as she recovered, “what’s amiss?” pulling her into him and pressing a gasp from her. “Do ye know I love ye Sassenach?” She was breathing so hard in his ear and it was driving him close to the edge. He held her pelvis still and pressed into her hearing her moan. He pushed his thumb between her legs feeling for her heat and almost lost it when touched their joining. Christ, not yet! He thought. He laid his thumb beside her throbbing, so softly, still holding her pelvis above him he pushed into her three times and then pressed into her cervix and heard the sweetest gasp and moan as her body grabbed him. He pushed into her constricting muscles and they pulled him into a shuddering release.

Jaime felt different parts of his body as he floated through the orgasmic afterglow. He did not know if he was under her, over her, or standing on his head. That little Sassenach had made a pretzel out of him and it thrilled him to the bone. He took a deep breath and wrapped his arms around where he thought she should be. His arm bumped into a shoulder and his big hand slid up her back. A moonless night had never been so fun, he thought, as he found the rest of her. He pulled her to him and turned toward her, and like a magician’s knot, their limbs slid apart attached to the correct bodies. “Yer magic Sassenach” he breathed. Jaime held her close and pulled the quilt up over them.

The days passed and Jaime and Claire settled into a loving peace at Fraser Equestrian Center. There were shows every weekend and possibly eventing to prepare for. The horse Jaime had banked on was due any day and she was anxious to ride him. Eventing is the triathlon in equine sports and one of few Olympic sports where men and women compete in the same event. It’s three days of extreme riding, starting with a dressage test, then timed cross country jumping, then stadium jumping. Horse and rider are judged as a team with boatloads of rules and stiff penalties if you break them.

Claire joined the excitement the day Jag arrived. She watched the muscled rump flex as he moved down the loading ramp, muscled shoulders and neck, very impressive. What Claire loved most were his eyes and beautiful head. She gave him a scratch and he lowered his head. “Well, aren’t you the prettiest boy. I’m Claire, your new partner.” He was a true black and striking to look at. For the first three days, Claire spent hours with him. Sometimes she would sit up on the coral bars and read to him, sometimes she would snap a lead on him and show him around. He was very alert and focused but lacked ground manners. The first time Claire stopped in front of him he just plowed into her. There were several feet stepped on and tail swats in the face but Claire loved him. Jag had some fancy attributes that would help them in the arena, like his tail. It was full and nearly touched the ground. She kept it conditioned and partially braided so he didn’t step on it.
To everyone’s amazement, Pup took a liking to Jag and would run for his stall as soon as his paws hit the ground. If the horse was gone, Pup would wait right there. Fred and Ginger were close enough for him to see Claire but he didn’t want to miss his buddy. Pup knew Jag’s footfall and would look around the corner from his stall with his tail thumping the corral bars. Claire thought it was the sweetest, most unlikely of friendships, that melted her heart.

Angus made arrangements for Claire to train over the cross country setup at a barn in Gilbert. Jag was in the mood, she could tell. Angus explained the course and what was allowable. He set his stopwatch and gave the signal to start. Claire was keeping a reign on Jag because she didn’t know what he would do. Afterward, she approached Angus trying to catch her breath.

“He’s yer partner lass, ye need to trust him not hold him back. Out here ye gotta get speed, and he can give it to ye but ye gotta give him his head, aye?” Claire tried again and again and slowly let Jag go. Once she pointed him at a jump she gave the signal to go like hell and he never faltered. Angus called her in. “See, he wants to run and he’s payin attention so all ye have to do is stay in the saddle. I’ll tell Jaime yer ready for first level, maybe we can get ye in this month.”

Claire had never known a horse with this much power and courage. “How can Jaime see that in a videotape?” she mumbled. With Jag loaded they headed back to the center. Claire entered the barn leading Jag and saw Pup’s head look around the corner. He bounded for them, one happy dog. Jag dropped his head to Pup. “C’mon, you guys can smooch in the stall, I’m exhausted.”

Claire brought two large groups of carrots in for Fred and Ginger. Fred rolled into her when she laid her head on his back. She climbed the corral bars between him and Ginger. “Come Fred.” He walked to her and she slid onto his back. “Don’t worry buddy, go back to eating your carrots. Claire laid on her back, head on his rump, and promptly fell asleep.

Rupert came into Jaime’s office looking puzzled. “Claire’s asleep on her horse.” Jaime looked up at him, “what?” Rupert looked anguished, “I don’t think it’s safe but I dinna want to tattle on the lass.” Jaime walked to Fred’s stall and there she was sound asleep on his back. He pulled her down and let her hug him. “It’s time for whiskey and a rest lass.” Claire rubbed her nose and looked up at him, her exhaustion was clear. “Maybe you and Pup spend the evening with me and I’ll see ye to bed early, aye? She pushed the hair out of her face, “Okay, you come and get me when you’re ready. C’mere Fred.” Jaime laughed and guided her out of the stall. She called Pup who came running and they all went home.

Rupert asked Angus later how Claire was doing with cross country. “If she learns to trust the laddie she’ll get the speed she needs to compete. Until then, she’s not worth the entry fees to show.” Rupert’s eyebrows shot up. “Are ye tellin Jaime then?” Angus shook his head, “not yet.”

Claire took a soothing shower and wrapped up in one of Jaime’s terry cloth robes. She stood on her tip toes for a kiss while he was flipping omelets. They ate and talked about Jag. When she didn’t answer a question he looked up and smiled. She rested her head on her hand, the fork in the other and was sound asleep. Jaime carried her to bed and turned off the light.
Laoghaire sat on her bunk seething over her father’s refusal to accept her calls from jail. She had endured about all she could take of this horrid place. Laoghaire’s pod of twenty-four women, two-person sleeping cubbies and a day room for eating, was like a can of sardines to her. The other women saw her for what she was, spoiled, white, and privileged and they all observed due diligence in provoking her. Laoghaire had no idea how much danger she was in. Jails in Maricopa County were known for the one-way inmates that come in and never come out. Bloodthirsty Sheriff Joe Arpaio provided all the incentive necessary for inmates to snap, and they did, regularly. Laoghaire was in her head when a group of five women approached her for her first lesson in respect. Before the leader could speak they heard the loud bang of the guard who was opening the door. The group backed off, waiting. “Mackenzie, roll-up and follow me!”

Laoghaire rolled her eyes, “about fucking time.” She rolled her mattress and followed the guard until someone jumped in front of her. “Next time ya here we gonna rearrange ya face, I promise, bitch. Laoghaire walked around her and jogged after the guard. “Stupid cunt,” she mumbled. She asked the guard if she was getting out, no response. She was used to this and figured she just had to wait, but in the meantime, she could make her list of who was first to feel her wrath and what would befall them. They would all be punished for her humiliation and torture. With that, her mood improved.

If Laoghaire thought sitting on her bunk being fed green bologna twice a day was bad, she quickly learned the true black heart of Sheriff Arpaio. As a parting gift to those unfortunate enough to cross his path, he made being ‘processed out’ a living nightmare. Laoghaire was shuffled from one holding cell to another. Each was crowded with women, anxious and testy. Half of the cells had nothing to sit on and too crowded to sit on the floor. When someone stepped on her foot she pushed the girl hard. “You idiot!” she yelled. Even someone as dense as Laoghaire could feel the shift in the energy. The tension was palpable as the girl turned around to look into the face she would surely change in the next two minutes. She looked at her eyes, her hair, her body, and delivered an uppercut to the cheek that knocked Laoghaire out.

Laoghaire woke up on the cold concrete holding her face and crying. A guard hauled her to her feet and looked at her cheek. “C’mon.” Laoghaire decided that while it hurt like a mother fucker to get hit, maybe it was worth it to be alone in the infirmary until they let her out. The guard hauled her to another holding cell, stuffed with women and shoved her in. Laoghaire was incredulous and turned her face into the corner to avoid the taunting that she was sure would come. She pressed her swelling cheek into the cold concrete wall and cried. Her tears filled her sinuous cavity which pressed mercilessly on her shattered cheek and she could barely stand the pain until it drained. Three more transfers to endure, each with a new group of unhappy inmates. Her head throbbed, her back hurt from hours of standing, and she was white-faced scared of further damage.

Her name was called at three o’clock in the morning. She was handed a bag with her clothes that were filthy and stinky from the first three days in county jail before they transferred her to an inmate uniform. She wanted to retch at the smell but put them on. She signed papers and was unceremoniously pointed to the exit. Laoghaire opened the door to sweet freedom. She took two steps and went back to pound on the door. “Hey, you can’t push me out in the middle of the night, I have no car here! I need to call someone!” She was terrified.

Realizing they were not going to open the door for her, she walked to the front of the building. There were cars lined up on the curb waiting for inmates to be released. She saw a line of taxis and phones. Her mood brightened and she heard someone call her name. It was Sara Barker, a newcomer to Laoghaire’s social circle and someone who desperately wanted in. Laoghaire had pestered everyone...
she knew to post her bail and it turns out to be this one, she thought. She smiled and walked to hug Sara. Once they pulled away Laoghaire asked Sara to take her home and gave directions. She would claim a headache at the door and finally be alone with no noise, no guards, and no watching her every move. Sara talked non stop until she pulled in the driveway of Laoghaire’s house and turned the car off. “I have a migraine right now and plan to lay on my bed in the dark until I feel better. Thanks for bail and the ride. Call you tomorrow.” She pushed the door closed and already had her key in hand. The car didn’t start until she closed the door.

Inmates become institutionalized quickly and feel disenfranchised from their life. The daily misery, hunger, fatigue, or fear becomes the predominant thought. The long hot shower with her own designer soap and shampoo seemed to jettison her back to her rightful place and her incarceration was put behind her. Her public defender mentioned a possibility of acquittal based on no witnesses to her involvement. One of the assailants was dead, the other in a coma. She could hope.

She thought about Jaime and how much he must miss her. He’s had to time to cool off and he’s losing money without a rider. All she has to do is show up looking sexy and it’s back to business. She couldn’t wait to get back to the show. If that idiot doctor is still hanging around she would be gone soon. She smiled and looked at her body while she dried off. She was lucky and deserving of big natural breasts, a slim waist, and tons of blonde hair. It was a good package. It pulled Jaime in, and would again. She only wished he didn’t want sex all the time. Christ, faking orgasms was easy but she hated the mess.

She climbed into bed and let her mind see Jaime’s big smile when she walked into the barn.

Claire was up with the dawn and was pleasantly surprised that Jaime was still asleep. The nights were getting warmer and he had pushed the quilt and sheets off him. Her heart rammed in her chest looking at his beautiful naked body. He always slept on his back, one hand on his chest. She wondered if he would mind if she put him in her mouth. He didn’t have an erection. She would be embarrassed if he got weird about it. She could hear the Jeopardy music in her mind and didn’t know what to do. Once she decided she was going to do it she couldn’t wait. It is very small like this and the whole thing will fit in my mouth, she thought. She pushed it in her mouth and tried to slide her mouth up and down but it got kinked in the down direction. She tried to think about the video when it started growing, quickly. Jamie moaned and grabbed her hair pushing her mouth back to task. “God Sassenach.” Now it worked just fine and she used her hands and played with the tip and when she pushed down on him his moans told her everything. His hips were coming up off the bed and Claire was instantly aroused and quickened her pace until he grabbed her and pulled her up.

Jaime looked at this wonderful and weird girl that had claimed his heart and mind and smiled at her look of victory. His voice was still sleepy as he pulled her under him. “That was a wonderful surprise Sassenach and yer very good at it. But I would feel so lonely to be the only one comin this mornin.” He ran his hands down her body, pinching her nipples and kissing her neck. He pulled her knee up against his stomach and dropped a soft hand to her fold. “Where, my love, did all this come from then? Yer so wet and swollen and it’s driving me out of my mind!” He bit her neck and nipples and stomach and inner thigh making her giggle uncontrollably until he invaded her with his tongue and the giggles stopped. Claire was so high already she felt out of control and pushed against his mouth. She wanted to tell him to make her come but could not remember how to speak. Jaime pushed her over the edge and struggled for the minute she needed to float in her pleasure. She pulled at his shoulders. “come here.” Jaime slid up and pulled her legs over his shoulders tilting her pelvis upward for the deepest penetration. He was loving her face so he entered her slowly until he was buried and pulled out completely watching her eyes open pleading, “again! Please, again.” He wanted to tease her more but he was hungry for her soft, wet, warmth. He pushed into her harder, over and over, hearing her moans that became hungry themselves. He slammed into her and ground his stomach against her and she clung to him. He knew she was close and his body was screaming at him to let it
go. Finally, he heard Claire’s distinctive groan followed by her gripping inner muscles. God this girl, he thought and pounded into her until he exploded.

He held her close to him and dropped his head to her shoulder gasping for air. They were quiet and sated and happy wishing the day would wait. “I love you so” she whispered. Jaime’s smile was huge although Claire couldn’t see it, nor could she feel his heart open and pull her in. He knew she loved him because he studied her all the time, wanting to know what every face meant, every sigh, every eye roll, or when her face and eyes softened when she looked at him. Hearing her say it made him so happy.

“Sassenach, ye should bring a change of clothes here for spontaneous sleepovers.” She laughed and kissed his chest. “That’s how it starts, next thing you know I’ll want a room addition for all my shoes.” Jaime looked at her surprised, “ye really have that many shoes?” Claire giggled, “well, no, but most girls do so take a note to self about that.” He hugged her and rolled over her to stand up and stretch. No lass, he thought, I want the one without all those shoes. The one with the silky black hair, tiny waist, beautiful eyes, and fat ass. I’m afraid ye set the bar so high no one will ever reach it. He had been surrounded by girls since puberty and she stood apart from all of them. Now he just had to wait for her to feel the same about him. Claire poked her head in the shower and got a wet sloppy kiss goodbye.

Rupert watched Angus school one of the new greenies and marveled at his ability to pull a side step out of a horse that never did it before. He was an exceptional trainer for building the foundation for dressage and jumping. He worried that his friend was making an exception for Claire and when Angus jumped down he asked him about it again. Angus considered and decided maybe Jaime should know. He hit Rupert in the chest, “thanks for lettin me make the decision Rupert.”

Angus explained Claire’s hesitation to Jaime and asked for another week before making a decision. “She wants it, she’s willing to work hard for it, but she won’t let em go.” Jaime considered. “Is she scared of gettin hurt or is this old training that we can undo?” Angus shrugged and shook his head. Jaime stood up. “I appreciate ye tellin me and I’ll take her today if that’s okay with ye.” Angus looked up at Jaime and felt relief flood through him. “That’s perfect Jaime.”

Jaime no longer trained horses or people. He mostly told people he gave up the saddle to run the business. He gave Angus pointers from time to time but limited his coaching to a few jumping clinics per year. Angus knew he had a lot riding on Jag but realized he had a lot riding on Claire as well. He almost tripped trying to get to Rupert to tell him. Rupert was in Jag’s stall talking to Claire when Angus came up and waved him away. Claire could hear Rupert whistle from ten stalls down. Pup was weaving in and out of Jags legs making Claire’s job much harder. “All right, the two of you stop playing, Jag has work to do.” Claire had a knot in her gut. She knew her time was far off goal yesterday and she didn’t know if she had the skill to ride the cross country on Jag. She was worried.

She heard the stall door open and looked up at Jaime’s handsome face. She always felt herself melt when he looked at her. He pulled her close and kissed her deeply. “Lass, ye made an impression on my brain this morning and I can think of nothin else.” His hands were everywhere suddenly and she could feel his erection. “I won’t be able to stay on this boy if you keep that up.” With his mouth to her ear, he said, “skip it today and come home with me Sassenach.” He used all his best moves until she was breathless. “Jaime, I can’t today, I would love to but I have the outdoor course reserved for an hour and it’s time to load.” She looked so sad to let him down and he felt like a prick testing her that way. “With him?” he pointed at Jag. “Of course with him.” He was acting peculiar she thought. “Okay, I’ll take ye today.” Claire was dumbfounded and followed after Jaime leading Jag to the trailer. “Really? Awesome!” She jumped up and down while she walked.

Once loaded they drove toward Gilbert. “So Sassenach, what do ye need the most work on and
what’s Jag need?” She explained how she couldn’t push Jag to get the time she needed to qualify Jaime listened and asked a few questions. “Okay, easy to fix.” He smiled at her and she was so happy. Eventing was Jaime’s specialty and to have his help right now meant everything to her. “Thank you for coming today. Eventing may be too much for me Jaime.” He laughed and looked at her like she was daft. “You are the best rider I’ve seen in many years, sweet Claire. Ye have it in ye.”

The normal eventing course is two to four and a half miles of rugged terrain and jumps that include wide ditches, water, hills and multiple obstacles with a single stride between them. The rider with the lowest score wins. Penalty points build up over the three-day events and the cross country is the hardest on horse and rider.

Claire took Jag around the course Jaime laid out and he watched them both feeling excitement in his stomach. He was in it for the money at first, after all, that was his business. But he started to see something else watching them and it made the hair stand up on his neck. He saw two rambunctious kids both doing what they loved and they had so much to learn from each other. He waved her in. Jag was ready to go and wasn’t even winded yet. Claire laughed, “he wants to go!” Jaime smiled at her beaming face. “What would happen if you let him go Sassenach?” She looked down, “I don’t know what that means actually.” He was happy with that answer, she was being honest. He tied her reigns together in a knot and told her to hold the knot and use one finger to change his direction. “Do ye trust me Sassenach?” She nodded her head. “This horse is not a quitter, he won’t run out from a fence. Trust him and know I would not tell ye to do it if I didna trust him. Oh, and double yer speed.” Claire’s eyebrows shot up but she held the knot and galloped toward the first fence. Jag opened his stride and covered the ground so fast Claire felt like she was flying. She touched the reign below the knot only to change his direction. She felt his power over the jumps, his haunches come under him before he left the ground, and saw his head and ears snap to focus when the obstacle was in sight. She glanced at Jaime who signaled to do the course again. Her smile was like a beacon and she almost doubled her time.

Jaime called her in and marveled at how striking they were together. “Well, how did that feel lass?” Claire’s cheeks were rosy and her eyes sparkled with her smile. “That was fast and fun!” Jaime nodded. “Let’s walk the course together and I’ll show ye some stuff.” Jag needed to walk and cool off and Claire jumped down to see what Jaime pointed out. “Footing is yer biggest concern. Ye walk the course first and look for mud, sand, or rocks that ye can avoid if possible. If the ground drops after the jump ye need to shorten his stride just before, let him take water how he wants. When he jumps back on solid ground let him go, that’s when ye cut yer time the most.” Claire listened intently as they covered a mile of obstacles and changing terrain.

Once Jag was loaded Jaime pulled her to him and kissed her softly several times. “When I have to watch yer round ass pumpin in the saddle it makes me weak Sassenach. Ye owe me for the lesson lass.” He whispered in her ear making her shiver. Claire let out a breath, “how about now.” He kissed her deeply and knocked her socks off in the best kind of way. When he broke the kiss her eyes opened with effort. I have some wee barn business to attend to but I mean to collect from ye tonight. She looked up at him, "how does Chinese food on the floor sound?” He started the truck, “perfect.”
Chapter 15

Claire was over the moon with today’s ride. She brushed Fred and ginger and gave lots of happy hugs. “Pup?” She looked toward Jag’s stall and saw a sleepy Pup emerge between the corral bars. “Were you sleeping?” She laughed. He trotted beside her all the way home. Claire always fantasized about having sex in front of a fire. It seemed so romantic She was aching to see that fantasy real and jumped in her truck heading for the rug store. She picked out a large black rug that simulated a bear skin. It was soft and thick. Perfect for laying on naked she thought. Standing in line to pay she became aware of her wet panties and rolled her eyes until she did the mental math. “Oh brother Claire you are hopeless for this guy” she mumbled.

Back at home she threw the rug in front of the fireplace and was very happy with the overall look. She played music and slow danced alone with Pup running between her legs trying to figure out the game. Later she soaked in a bubble bath and thought about Jaime making love to her that morning. He had kept her at a low burn all day and her body was aching for him. As she shaved her legs she touched herself and gasped. Jesus Jaime, she thought, get here soon. She sat up and pulled the drain to hurry and dry off. She bent over to blow her hair and in her mind Jaime was behind her, holding her hips and assaulting her. She stood up and applied her basic makeup. She looked at her face closely and reached for her unused eyeliner.

Claire called in an order for Chinese and dropped the large couch pillows on the rug. She sprayed her neck with Opium and looked approvingly at her rimmed eyes. Jaime Fraser, she thought, I hope you’re ready for this.

The food arrived fifteen minutes before Jaime. He walked in smelling clean and masculine. Claire had to calm down after a hello kiss. Jaime looked at her closely and smiled. He made a fuss over the new rug and noticed Claire sat down immediately looking up at him. He grabbed the bottle of whiskey and two glasses and joined her on the rug. It took a supreme effort to pretend she was acting normal when she was oozing her need. He was enthralled. He touched her cheek and noticed the light sunburn on her face from today. He tried to discuss her ride today but she was too distracted and mostly said uh ha. He gave in and pulled her to him.

They laid side by side on the rug and Claire just stared at his beautiful eyes. He kissed her over and over again. “Do you want a fire Sassenach?” Claire looked at the fireplace for a moment. “Yes! A fire, yes. I have no wood though.” Jaime chuckled and went to the wood pile on the side of the house. When his hand touched the log his mind went back to the night she was attacked. He relived a moment of that terror and shook his head. “Not tonight, the lass has a powerful need.”

Once the fire was roaring Claire remembered the food and brought it out with plates and chopsticks. She was amazed that Jaime was very familiar and had no problem eating his fill. Claire stretched out on the soft rug and closed her eyes sighing. Jaime saw her short shirt pull away from her jeans exposing two inches of skin. Her flat stomach dropped below the waistband of her jeans leaving a sizable gap to her sacred place. His shrimp was suspended halfway to his mouth and he suddenly lost interest in food and dropped the sticks into the container. He crept up to her and wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, pulling her mouth to his. His kiss was long, soft, and promising. Jaime got up to grab the whiskey bottle and turn the lights off. “Oh! That is so much better!” He watched her and his heart swelled at her honesty. Jesus lass, ye got to have some faults and now’s the time to show em because I canna believe yer real, he thought.

He pulled Claire on top of his body and pushed her knees to either side of him. He gently pushed her up to sit astride him. She moved a bit this way and that and then stopped as his erection made contact.
with her heat. He watched her face register the contact and he feasted on her reaction. She lowered her lips to his and pushed her tongue into his mouth making Jaime take a deep breath and hold her to him. Watching her experience this position made him hard as granite. “Take yer shirt off lass.” She smiled at him and off came the shirt. He touched her bare breasts and caressed her skin, “yer perfect mo chridhe.” She pulled at Jaime’s shirt until it was over his head. He gripped her hips and moved her along his erection and she gasped. “Ah, that’s very nice,” she gasped. He swung her body under him. “Tell me what ye want lass.” He licked her nipples and sucked until she moaned. He popped the button on her jeans and slid them off. He kissed her inner thighs up to her core and kissed her through her tiny panties. Claire grabbed his waistband and popped the button, looking in his eyes she lowered the zipper and pushed them down. Jaime shook them off and rolled toward her lifting her leg he scraped her inner thigh with his whiskers and saw Claire arch her back. He dropped his head and slowly let his tongue slide into her. Slowly he pushed in and out of her until she was ready to ignite. She grabbed his head and ground against his tongue. Her chest was heaving and she was moaning and pleading with him to end her suffering. Jaime pushed himself up to watch her face as his thumb circled her pulling her towards the edge. She looked at him as she fell off careening toward oblivion. Her moan ignited his erection and he wanted to plow into her more than his next breath. He pushed the hair away from her face and watched her closely. When she returned to earth he pushed himself onto his back and pulled her body up to straddle him.

Claire was still reeling from her orgasm but as all women do, her body felt the invitation for more and her eyes snapped to his. He waited and felt her body inquire. Just a twitch of movement from her hip against him. He waited and squeezed her nipples until her eyes and mouth flew open and she moved against him. He placed a hand on each hip and rocked her back and forth as her eyes closed and she dropped her head back. “Take me inside ye lass.” Claire held him up and dropped her warm body on him. Both gasped as he filled her. “Open yer legs Sassenach, let me in.” He pushed her knees open and slid into her depths with a groan. Claire pulled his hands to her hips, “show me.” He moved her hips back and forth and was overcome with his own need causing a tornado in his groin. He flipped them over and drove himself deep into her over and over until he shuddered.

Jaime felt the intense pleasure followed by images of Claire becoming the person she is now. When he first woke her up in Fred’s stall, to watching her with her horses, the bathroom project, her boldly taking the mount when Laoghaire stormed out, her chaps in the schooling pen, the bed bugs, the tarantula, sex videos, and the wanton woman who laid under him, eyes closed breathing heavy.

“Jesus Sassenach, you are one in a million lass.”

Claire’s regular brain returned and they talked at length about her ride today, when she would show, and Jaime’s plans for her and Jag as a team. “Jaime, how can we do all that if he sells by the second level?” Jaime’s face was a mask, “he willna sell until ye win third level lass.” Claire could not believe her ears. “That was not the plan, Jaime. What happened to cause this change?” Jaime showed his true face to her, with all the love and support he had for her and it made her eyes burn. “When I watched ye today I saw a team in the making. He’s important for ye lass, he has a lot to teach ye.” The tears let loose and Claire wiped them with irritation. “What is wrong with me?” She reached for her clothes feeling uncomfortable with her emotions. She did not know how to react to a selfless and kind gesture toward her. Jaime watched her and felt helpless. He pulled his clothes on and followed her to the kitchen with a hand full of cartons from their dinner.

“That is the nicest, most generous thing anyone has ever done for me Jaime and it seems like I don’t know how to react to it. Thank you.” He pulled her into his arms and hugged her. “Yer welcome Sassenach. Did it earn me a night holdin ye?” When she looked at him he could see her gratitude, “of course.”

Claire was in the barn early riding Fred and Ginger. She loved these two so much but they were not being used for therapy and she had to make a decision. She could find someone to manage them for
her or send them back to Boston. She decided to advertise online for an equine therapy manager and see if that might work.

She watched Angus working their youngest greenie who seemed disinterested in learning or moving for that matter. Angus jumped down and pulled six colorful poles off various jumps and dropped them on the ground spacing them an equal distance apart. “Look laddie, these are cavaletti’s and ye walk over em wi’out steppin on em, aye?” He mounted and walked the horse over the poles as he stepped on all of them. The horse had become quite panicked and Angus spoke to him in soft Gallic to calm him down. He jumped off and straightened the poles leading the horse away. At the other end of the arena, Angus walked in front of the horse still speaking encouragingly. As they approached the cavaletti’s Angus exaggerated lifting his feet and stepping over the poles. The horse followed successfully and was rewarded with a rub on his neck. Claire was giggling behind her hand and slipped away. On her way out Angus mentioned she should be running three times per week at least four miles. “I am in the best shape of my life Angus!” His grin was wicked, “ok lass, he pointed outside, the road goes on for two miles. Run to the end of the road and back. If ye not winded ye dinna have to run!” She glared at him but agreed to his test.

It was a gorgeous spring day around seventy degrees. Claire laced up her running shoes, poked her earbuds in, grabbed a water, and headed out. The road had a slight incline and she was excited to look at the desert as she ran. Five minutes in she was feeling good, no problem. Fifteen minutes she was breathing hard, twenty minutes her lungs were on fire and she bent over and held her knees to breathe. “Jesus Christ, four and a half miles at a gallop, Angus was right.” She pushed on and finished the four miles but she stopped to breathe three times. She collapsed on the couch and Pup watched her and cried. “What is it Pup?” He kept crying and he wasn’t wagging his tail. Claire looked in the mirror and saw a beet red puffy face looking back. She laughed and splashed cold water on her cheeks. “I’m okay Pup, just out of shape. Maybe you should go with me tomorrow.”

Laoghaire’s life was ruled by the social scene in Phoenix. The daughters of the rich all attended Xavier College Preparatory, a private Catholic school for grades nine through twelve. After graduation, the group breaks into cliques of like-minded girls who observe a pecking order. Laoghaire reigned supreme in horsemanship and when she started dating Jaime she was boosted into her own stratosphere. Everyone on an English saddle in Phoenix knew who he was and would give a kidney to date him. Laoghaire was untouchable and she gorged herself on their envy. She wasn’t about to lose her status and would do just about anything to keep it.

She surveyed her wardrobe and settled on low riding jeans, a funky Guess top, and snakeskin boots. Her matching bra and panties were black lace and accentuated her curves. Satisfied, she started her Mustang and headed toward the Equestrian Center. She was so excited to see Jaime’s expression. She hadn’t missed him necessarily because they never went out so she couldn’t parade him in front of her friends. Jaime liked food, horses, showing and sex making him the most boring person she knew. She would pull him back in and then see him as little as possible just like before. She dabbed lip gloss on with her pinky and fluffed her hair. Rupert was building saddle tree’s when he heard a familiar engine pulling in. His head snapped up and he almost swallowed the nails between his lips.

He whistled for Angus and started walking toward the main isle almost colliding with Angus. “What’s wrong?” Since the day they agreed on a secret whistle that would bring the other one running Angus had only heard it once, today. “We’ve got company. Laoghaire.” She walked toward the barn and was intercepted by the guys standing shoulder to shoulder. “Oh, hello, where’s Jaime?” Later they would both think of a dozen clever phrases but right now they were speechless. “Lass, get in yer car and drive away. Yer not welcome here. Jaime won’t be as kind.”

Laoghaire was stunned at being told to leave. “Fuck off, he’s my boyfriend and I work here you idiots.” She pushed Angus and walked between them. They stared at each other knowing she would
be rounding the corner to his office already.

Jaime bent over the spring show schedule and penciled in numbers representing the horses that would enter. When he looked up she stood in his door frame with a huge smile on her face. “I’m back!” He leaned back in his chair and studied her face. He was both blown away and concerned for her audacity to show up here. “What did I miss? Do we show this weekend? Jaime, what is wrong with you?”

Jaime dialed Dougal Mackenzie’s private number. “Laoghaire is standin in my office and she will be removed either by you or the police. This is a courtesy to ye.” Laoghaire was shaking her head, “why are ye being so mean. I was acquitted and had nothing to do with it! It wasn’t my fault!” Her voice was getting louder by the second. Jaime pulled a card out of his wallet and dialed the cop who responded when Claire was attacked. “Laoghaire Mackenzie is standin in my office. Right.” He clicked off and looked at her try to cry. He had his mask on but inside he felt like magma about to push through the restraining ground. Please hurry he thought. Someone take this animal from my sight before I ruin my life punishing her. When he wouldn’t respond to her she started screaming at him. Jaime motioned to Rupert and Angus to come in and Rupert held her away so they could get between her and Jaime. She was shrieking, kicking at chairs and walls. She picked up a chair to throw at Jaime when the officer stood at the door and addressed her. “Laoghaire Mackenzie, put the chair down or go back to jail. Her red furious face looked up at the cop and dropped the chair. She stood still and looked at her feet. Jaime thanked his friends and they cleared out giving the officer room to come in. He handed Jaime an index card with directions to the court and suggested he get a restraining order against her as soon as they open tomorrow.

“Let’s go Ms. Mackenzie.” Dougal Mackenzie was walking in and addressed his daughter harshly. He nodded at Jaime and left with her.

Jaime tapped Claire’s name on his phone and let out a long breath. “I am comin to get ye packed for a few days at my house Sassenach. Tell ye when I get there.” Jaime was sure of one thing, Laoghaire was insane and dangerous. Suddenly he could not get to Claire fast enough.

Claire saw red hair out the peephole and opened the door. When she saw Jaime’s face her heart almost stopped. “What’s happened?” He hugged her then led her to the couch and told her what had happened. Claire’s face went white as a sheet and her eyes darted around like she needed to escape. Jaime held her shaking hands and suggested they pack some clothes and anything else she would need. Claire stood and gathered things like a robot while Jaime packed up Pup’s dishes, food, and bed. In her room, he took her boots, helmet, and chaps. He kissed the top of her head and rubbed his hand up her back. She looked up, “ready.”

Claire put her things in the guest room not wanting to clutter Jaime’s room. She felt weirdly detached from the scene, like watching herself from behind. Jaime held her close and promised he would protect her and get a restraining order in the morning. He bent to look into her eyes, “yer safe, love.” Please don’t leave Arizona, he thought, ye know how to run but I need ye next to me.

Claire forced herself to snap out of the fear and she put her arms around him. “If she is that crazy, I expect they will have her back in jail in no time. I’m fine, really. Go back to work.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him. “I’ll be back in thirty minutes and then we’re going to the Mountain cafe because I have no food.”
Chapter 16

Claire looked out the wall of windows facing the barns and felt like a prisoner. She could not prepare for horse trials locked in the house. She started pacing and felt the anger bubbling up in her stomach. “How dare you, filthy deranged bitch, dictate my life and opportunities. I won’t let you do it!” She shouted out loud and heard Jaime gasp at the door. “Who’s here lass?” he said quietly looking around. “No one.” Jaime looked confused and relieved. “Is it Mountain cafe time?” She smiled when he held his hand out for her.

The next two weeks were very busy and there was not another sign of Laoghaire. Claire stood at the bars between Fred and Ginger and got a two-horse hug, kissing them both. Five stalls down she heard Jag kicking his bars and Pup humping at him. She rolled her eyes and wondered how she ever got this lucky.

Angus brought her hand weights and explained the movements and repetitions she was to do. The weights were filthy so she couldn’t take them to Jaime’s house and she couldn’t find any other place to use them. She went in search of a free-weight gym and a trainer.

She walked through the door of the Body Shop and looked around. A very large, muscled gentleman approached her. He shook her hand and she watched his bulging muscles followed by a deep blush when he saw her looking at his body. She explained what she needed and her time frame. Lance looked down from his six-foot three-inch height and decided to help. “My name’s Lance Dreher. I’m the owner and head trainer. Depending on the times you need I can probably train you.” She looked up, “no girl trainers?” He smiled, “sorry.” The gym had very few people in it and this time of day was good for her. They agreed to three days per week and he reworked the movements Angus had designed. Lance explained the balance of muscle groups and while shoulders and thighs might play predominantly with her riding the other groups needed to keep up to assist and balance. She was smiling when she shook his hand. Before she was out the door Lance asked if she knew Jaime Fraser, a good friend of his. Claire eyebrows shot up, “as a matter of fact I do.”

Claire brought groceries home and started pushing chunks of vegetables and chicken onto skewers. She set them into a marinade in the frig. She was almost late getting back to ride Jag. Walking in she noticed the jump configuration had changed and looked far more difficult. Her heart was pounding with excitement. “I’m sorry! I got held up!” She brushed Jag quickly, picked his hooves, and scolded Pup for eating what came out. She bent deep from the waist to zip up her chaps and struggled with one of the zippers. When she stood, red-faced, Jaime was smiling at her. She smiled back and clipped each side into her belt loops.

Jaime looked around and pulled her into Jag’s stall for a deep kiss. He whispered in her ear, “I want ye lass. I want to bend ye to my will and then take ye places ye’ve never been.” He touched her briefly and released her as boarders came toward the barn. She looked like a mannequin, suspended in some awkward position. “I’m sorry! I got held up!” She brushed Jag quickly, picked his hooves, and scolded Pup for eating what came out. She bent deep from the waist to zip up her chaps and struggled with one of the zippers. When she stood, red-faced, Jaime was smiling at her. She smiled back and clipped each side into her belt loops.

Claire was stunned. What did he say he wanted to do, bend me? Bend me to his will he said, like a caveman probably. Fuck if that’s not the hottest thing I’ve ever heard! She thought. She led Jag into the arena trying to shake off the sexual energy Jaime left her with. “Where’s ye saddle lass?” Claire looked up, “what?” Angus trotted toward the barn, “where’s ye head?” Claire mumbled “it’s” but he was already in the barn. When she swung up in the saddle her hips rolled forward of their own volition and she almost moaned. Jesus Christ, this is ridiculous! She jumped down and handed the
reins to Angus. “I'll be right back, so sorry, I have… female issues.” She knew that would twist Angus and he would excuse her with no more questions. Mention a vagina or a period and these boys would knock themselves unconscious trying to get away.

Claire ran for Jaime’s office and found him alone, thank God. She closed the door and locked it and twisted the blinds closed. Jaime leaned back in his chair and watched her smiling. She came around the desk and pulled him up by his shoulders. “Jaime, I’m going to come in the saddle if” he silenced her with a kiss that pulled the air out of her lungs. When he bit her neck she felt him invade her breeches and work his magic. It might have been the fastest orgasm in history but she was grateful as she clung to him, panting. He picked her up in a hug until she was back to this planet. “I have to go!” Jaime stopped her and suggested she fix her pants first. “Oh! Thanks, I have news tonight!” Her smile was bright and her cheeks still rosy as she ran back to the arena.

She swung up on Jag and started warming up while Angus showed her the course. Stadium jumping was her specialty where she was more in sync with the horse’s stride than her own walking. Angus was careful not to compliment her, ever, fearing she wouldn’t work as hard. “ye runnin outa time lass so I put in a half-stride that ye’ll see at the trials. Ye need speed so loop him twice at a gallop and shorted his stride just before, then let him go. Claire shook her head yes and glanced at the two jumps that were too close together to be possible. Angus called her in. “I see ye doubt lass, he will feel ye doubt on approach. This is a confidence object and ye risk losin all the trust ye’ve built up with him.” He looked in her eyes, “I’d rather pull it down than risk that lass. When his front feet hit the ground after the first fence they lift for the second fence immediately. No stride in between. It’s required for Novice Claire, but maybe ye not ready.”

Claire looked at the jump and how much area she had to build his speed. “Tell me how Angus!” She was so humble at that moment pleading with him and he had to cough a couple times to use his stern voice. “Faith lass, once he hits his speed, point him at the object, shorten him five strides before, and release the reins when he lifts for the first fence.” He tied her reins together at the ends. “Can ye do it?” It took her a minute of studying the fence before she nodded her head and trotted away.

They took twelve complex fences flawlessly and Claire shifted her weight slightly forward and put a leg on Jag to increase his speed. Angus marveled at how fast he was. When she pointed him at the object, Jag’s ears flipped forward, and Angus held his breath. Like it was slow motion, he saw the shortening stride, and watched Claire let go of the reins on take off! “Jesus bloody Christ,” he said. Jag figured it all out long before he jumped and had a flawless execution. “Oh my God! Angus! Did you see that?” Wow, he thought, the lass has bigger balls than most men. “Ye both looked perfect lass.” Angus let out a long breath. Claire was so excited, for her, and Jag, and her praise brought Jaime out to see. He saw Claire’s arms in the air, her knotted reins and the fence. His eyes bulged at the level of difficulty and wondered if Angus was trying to kill his girlfriend. She must have let him go at a full gallop racing toward an impossible obstacle. That was the very definition of trust he thought. It’s working.

Claire clipped Jag into the wash rack and gave him a super soapy bath rubbing his muscles out. Certain spots would make him lift his head and curl his lips back in pure pleasure making her giggle. While she worked she told him what a good, strong, fast, trusting, boy he was. Pup trotted up to Claire, sopping wet, and shook water on her before attacking the water coming out of the hose. Claire scraped the water off Jag and hugged his neck before leading him to his stall. She gave him two sugar lumps and went to find her dog. “This is a new level, even for you Pup.” He was upside down in the puddled water with the hose in his mouth. When he saw Claire, he jumped up and humped at the hose looking back and forth between it and Claire. “We are going home!” she giggled. He continued to look at the hose until she whistled at the end of the aisle. He bounded after her, hose forgotten.
Claire felt her leg muscles stretch with the street incline to Jaime’s house. She had stopped running with the whole Laoghaire threat but knew she had to get back to it. It was double doubtful she would get anyone at the barn to run with her. She had to figure something out or asphyxiate two miles into the course.

She took a long hot shower and replayed the jump in her mind over and over again. Her voice of doubt reminded her a refusal would have killed her or left her paralyzed. She shivered and said “nonsense” out loud.

She was excited to see Jaime tonight and share her news. She was enjoying their domestic situation more than she expected and purposefully avoided the subject of going home. She pulled her hair up in a ponytail and went down to get the grill started.

It was mid-March and the days were getting warmer. Jaime poked his head out the back door and marveled at the length, or lack of length, in Claire’s cutoffs. His eyes moved up her naked back, saw the knots of her halter top and that damn ponytail that weakened him like kryptonite. To avoid having to catch hot meat flying through the air he cleared his throat so he didn’t startle her. Her smile came around to greet him. She was on tiptoes seeking his mouth and he gave it. “Ye smell like heaven Sassenach.” He kissed her bare shoulder until they slipped away. She handed him a bottle of his favorite beer and her arms went around his middle. She looked up and smiled at him as he played with her ponytail. “Hope you’re ready to eat. I had a huge day and have tons to tell you.”

They ate in silence for a while, each in their own thoughts about the other. Claire took a long pull from her beer and stated: “I hired your friend Lance to train me today.” He was surprised but smiling, “he is a good man, the perfect man for the job!” He was laughing and shaking his head. “How did that happen?” Claire explained that Angus’s weights were too dirty and she wandered into the first gym Siri sent her to, adding he was way huge and no girl trainers, and she feared her legs would break like sticks when he trained her. Then she took a breath. “yer in good hands lass. Lance worked wi’me when I recovered from a strained hamstring. Ye canna do better than Lance.” She was smiling at him, looking for the sincerity, or waiting for the other shoe to drop, right after it kicked her. She was quiet, waiting, and got up to carry dishes to the sink. She looked at him, wondering if she was safe to talk about her jump today. She sat down slowly, watching him, and Jaime looked up at her with a questioning face. “What is it lass?” Her face suddenly brightened like she just saw St. Nick. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him everywhere she could reach until he pulled her down on his lap and made the kiss serious. Feeling her body on his lap he wondered if he would ever get enough of her.

Claire pulled away breathing deeply, “thank you for being the coolest boyfriend ever. I have other news!” He let her go with great effort and watched her become animated in recounting her leap of faith on Jag today. “I heard ye yellin and came out to protect Angus from ye.” He stopped laughing and touched her cheek, but it was a victory dance I saw and I couldn’t be more proud of ye Sassenach.” His eyes were full of love and her back stiffened as the burn started behind her eyes. Jesus, not this again, she thought. She practically launched from her seat and ran outside to fuss with the grill. Her tears rolled down her cheeks and she willed them away. You stupid idiot stop that right now and she stomped her bare foot on the concrete.

Jaime gave her a minute knowing she would want it. He thought about each time this happened and wondered if it was his raw emotion that made her cry. Had no one ever been bone-deep proud of her before? Has no one shown her an act of kindness like saving Jag for her? Christ, he thought, how is that possible? His thoughts were coming fast, a parentless girl, an uncle, remote villages until high school and the competitive nature of medical school. Her lack of guile, her honesty, and four years of loveless narcissistic abuse from her mentor and lover. “Jesus.”
Claire scraped the grate of the grill and felt his arms circle her waist. He took the scraper and walked her backward to the lounge dropping into it with her held tightly. He pulled the hair tie and ran his fingers through her hair pushing her head under his chin. He just held her for a minute. “I have never been in love before Sassenach. I struggle with overwhelming feelings for ye and I am lost with insecurity. When ye said ye loved me, it freed me from my mental war no to ask ye again. Countless hours I spent in my head wonderin does she love me too. I feel like a stallion ready to break through and hold ye to me so the world will’na take ye. Sometimes I fear I’m missin each moment with ye thinkin about how to keep ye. It’s a constant mental war against my impulsive heart, and fear, that won’t allow me to relax and just be happy. Emotions are powerful lass and if they make ye cry then let yerself cry.” He kissed the top of her head. “I love ye fiercely Sassenach.”

She held him tightly around his waist and was overcome with his honesty and love for her. She no longer felt like a total mess, or at least she had his company in that regard. “I love you too, so much.” They shared the lounge and each other while the sky turned to a brilliant pink with the setting sun.

“I bought you a French Silk pie.” Jaime lifted his head to look at her, “what about a French Silk pie?” She kissed him, “I bought one for you.” He leaned into her face, “give me yer tongue Sassenach.” She climbed up on him and held his face before dropping her lips to his and softly invading his mouth. It was Jaime’s undoing. Her soft tongue. His hands were everywhere and she pressed her hips against his erection. She pulled away from him and reluctantly got to her feet. “Do you want some pie?” Jaime shook his head, “shower first mo chridhe.”

Claire got the dishes cleaned up and cut two pieces of pie, putting the chocolate curls on Jaime’s. She felt so close to him after he spoke from his heart. The man who broke down her door to save her struggled with emotions too. Jaime came bounding downstairs still hot from his shower and grabbed her and both pies in the other hand. They sat facing each other on the couch but he would not let her take a bite. “New rule Sassenach” he smiled at her. “Since French Silk pie is too delicious to eat slowly. Ye have to answer a question before the fork gets to yer mouth, do ye agree?” Claire was laughing and looking at her pie. “Of course, ask me anything.” With her fork at the ready, Jaime asked, “what did it feel like to drop your reins before the jump today?” He watched her eyes lose focus and she smiled, “I surrendered…everything, to Jag. I knew he could do it so I took myself out of the equation, and…I let him.” Her eyes focused and she looked hopeful at Jaime. It took monumental strength for him not to tackle her with all the praise he felt. “Ye can eat Sassenach.” Claire looked at him, “what feelings did you have when Laoghaire was in your office?” He sucked in a breath, wanting to lie and protect her from hearing this, but how could he after her open hearted admission? He looked at his lap, “I prayed for someone to come and take her away before I hurt her. Please Sassenach,” his words came in a rush, “I would never, have never, hit or touched a woman in anger.” His eyes were pleading, “she isna human to me.” Claire launched at Jaime and kissed him hard. “I’m sorry! Jaime, that was such an inappropriate question! I wondered if you still found her attractive. I didn’t think. He held her tight, “I would never hurt ye lass.” She kissed him again. “I know that sweetheart.”

“I want to take my turn again, may I? Oh, you can take a bite.” Jaime put half the piece in his mouth and closed his eyes to savor it. Claire watched him and wanted to kiss him, everywhere. “What is bending me like a caveman?” She blurted. Jaime’s eyes flew open, “what?” She moved his plate to the coffee table and climbed in his lap. “You said bend me like a caveman today in Jag’s stall. I want you to do that. It was so hot.” She held his face and spoke an inch from his lips. “Tell me what that means!” She whispered.

Jaime was, as always, taken aback by the sexual Claire who had no brake it seemed. She was the embodiment of living in the moment when aroused and that, Jaime decided, made him the luckiest man alive. He was absolutely clueless about a caveman until it snapped to grid in his brain and he grabbed her. “My Sassenach,” he growled, “ye dinna go to such places with me. I said I wanted to
bend ye, to my will, remember?” She closed her eyes and put her lips against his, “I remember now. I want that.” Jaime grabbed a handful of hair and pulled her head back sharply. She released a breath as he ran his hand down her neck and chest, pinching her nipples and making her gasp. “My will may no be to yer likin my love.” He grabbed her nipple under her shirt.” She was panting, “show me and I will like it.” In Jaime’s mind, he was beating his erection down with a big stick. In reality, he would rather walk on broken glass than expose the true nature of male sexuality to her. He moved her over on the couch, “who’s turn is it?” He asked and took a deep breath.

Claire’s eyes opened and she was confused. What was he hiding? She stood in front of him and looked into his eyes as she unbuttoned her shirt and let it drop. Jaime watched her and the chaos in his head was replaced by rapt attention. She popped the button on her cut-offs and dropped the zipper. He watched her lithe body move in front of him as her hand moved down into her shorts, between her legs. She gasped. “Take them off.” Jaime’s voice sounded different and it thrilled her. He pulled one foot up on the couch so she was right in front of his face. “Touch it Sassenach.” She did and then put her finger into his mouth. Jaime was naked in two moves. He held her hips and pushed her to her knees before pushing her mouth on him. “Sweet Jesus” he breathed. She was moaning when he slid up against her throat. He pulled her to her feet and bent her over the arm of the coach pushing into her depths. She groaned deep in her chest and pushed against him with a force he didn’t expect. She was demanding with her body and it thrilled him. He grabbed her hair and held her against him as he pounded her. He stopped suddenly, gasping for breath, and carried her upstairs. He laid her on the bed and brought her to a swift finish, gently rolling her over until she landed. Get yer ass in the air Sassenach. She pushed up against him and he pushed her legs apart as he thrust into her over and over again. He touched her throbbing and continued his ramming, breathing hard in her ear. When he heard the moan that signaled her release he let go and exploded deep inside of her. He fell to her side and held her to him. Trying to breathe he asked,” are ye alright Sassenach.” All she could say is “Oh my God.”

They stood under the hot water in a hug with sweet tender kisses, soapy hands then fluffy towels. There was profound love between them and they both felt they could finally relax and enjoy each moment.

Jaime pulled the quilt up and pulled her to him. They were both seconds from sleep but she heard “I love my brave lassie.”
Chapter 17

Claire’s schedule was full. She trained three times per week with Lance, rode cross country with Jag twice per week, dressage twice per week, and shows every weekend with the greenies. One horse sold after Claire won in stadium jumping. There were two left and she hoped they would sell soon so she could concentrate on Jag.

She hoped to enter the horse trials at the Novice level in late April so she had less than a month... Jamie’s rule was absolute. You enter one level under what you can do consistently. Cross country at Novice level required 350 to 400 meters per minute (mpm). The next level up required 420 to 470 mpm. Jag was consistently finishing over 400 but Jamie needed more. Claire was hot, tired, and frustrated, one evening and challenged Jaime about this rule. She was angry and he gave her the respect of listening to her argument. Then he said no. Claire was fuming and left Jaime at home to spend time with Fred and Ginger. She needed space to cool off. Jaime was a world champion eventer and she had no business arguing with him about it. She knew that. She also knew it would take a miracle to pull 420 mpm and above out of Jag consistently. “All this work for nothing.” She mumbled.

“What’s that lass?” She looked up at Angus. “What are you doing here so late?” He smiled and told her he finally got the ‘dumb one’ to stay awake through a seven jump course. Claire raised her arms in mock victory but she couldn’t hide her sadness. “What’s amiss lass?” She took a deep breath, I’ll never pull another 20 meters from Jag by the April trial deadline. I know he has the strength but I can’t pull it out of him.” Angus looked like he already knew the answer and Claire was ready to beat him down for it. “Jaime takes ye to the course, what’s say I move in about a mile and watch the laddie.. and ye of course. I’ll be tellin Jaime first just so ye know.” Claire was so happy she hugged him hard and Angus nearly fainted. He watched her skip out of the barn and Pup run after her.

“You what?” Jaime was not happy with the promise Angus made to watch the interior jumps. Angus tried to defend himself explaining how sad she was and he asked Jaime why the customary spotter was not afield for Claire’s training. “Ye canna see her two miles in, ye have’na any idea what she’s doin out there! I understand holdin Jag back for third level, if they make it ye bumped yer gain by fifty grand at least. Jaime, yer not makin sense. Why are ye not throwin everything ye got into their trainin?”

Jamie sat down hard in his chair and looked at Angus. “Because the heathers and hills canna hold a candle to that lasses spirit and heart.” Angus gasped like Jaime had just declared Scotland illegitimate. “She could be an Olympian, I know it, or the best burn surgeon in the country maybe, but not until she can risk it all Angus and she has to trust him with her life.” Angus was absolutely failing to understand anything Jaime was saying. His eyes looked up and around the ceiling trying to access information in the deep recesses of his mind. “I already know what she doin out there. She’s takin control when it gets scary, she’s not lettin Jag pick his spot, she’s pullin him to the side of the stretches to avoid rocks or mud, and she’s afraid of the water, so she takes over instead of relyin on Jag.” Angus’s mouth hung open and he stared at Jaime. “I thought ye liked the lass.”

Jaime was twisted over Claire’s barrier. He was willing to keep Jag another six months and be her silent punching bag when her frustration boiled over. She was the hardest worker he had ever known, always for his best interest and she never tired of the constant demands on her. He could give her this like he so desperately wanted to but she would face herself again at the next level and fail. He looked at Angus who was completely confused. “Angus, do ye remember when ye got picked on by Sean in fifth grade?” Angus’s eyes lit up remembering that bully. “Ah, I knocked him flat I did!” Jaime leaned forward looking at his friend. “What I remember is the month leadin up to
that fight ye were shittin ye britches and haven ye dad come to school, and tryin to avoid getting killed by that big kid. Do ye remember that part?” Angus looked at his shoes, “oh, well tis somethin I like to forget Jaime boy.” Jaime pressed the memory “the last day ye were sure it was dyin time. He was waitin for ye and ye had no way to escape it.” Jaime put a pencil between his teeth and watched his friend squirm. “What were ye thinkin Angus? Did ye see yersel bloody on the ground, pissin yersel in front of Katie? Did ye think he might drag ye around by yer hair and kick ye in the teeth? Or maybe what ye feared was somethin I could never imagine.”

Angus squirmed and remembered the fear of something so huge, so dark, and so deadly, it stole his appetite for days, his sleep at night, his every moment. He remembered sitting in the kitchen with his mother and refusing to play after school. Jaime watched and waited. “Can ye see’im? Sean? Standin at the end of the playground. Ye had to walk by the kid to get home, no way around. Remember Angus? Look at me Angus. At that very moment, ye are Claire.” Angus lost focus and seemed to be getting what was happening to her. “I’m a good Scot and I love a good story. So tell me the rest Angus. Right before he delivered the fatal blow, what did ye do?” Angus’s smile was big and wicked. “Ah! I knocked him flat Jaime boy! He had a shiner for a week! Twas the best moment of my life!” Jaime relaxed, lesson almost complete. “What about after that, what about the next bully Angus?” Angus thought about that, “just Sean’s brother said stuff and I ran after him but nothin happened.”

“Do ye see what’s happenin to Claire Angus, and why I canna let ye help her?” Angus nodded his head. “What if she doesna take the risk Jaime?” Without skipping a beat, “Jag goes to the first bidder. Sell him quick so she doesna hurt so bad.” Jaime’s voice was just above a whisper like the effort to say it was more than he could bear. “There will be another Jag someday and she will kill or die to win.” Angus looked at Jaime’s heart breaking and once again congratulated himself on never falling in love.

“Oh, Angus, one more thing. Knocking Sean out will not be the best moment of your life. There’s a better one comin.”

Jamie closed his eyes and thought about the best person he’s ever known. “Come on lass, please figure it out, for the love of Christ.” He couldn’t take it anymore. He could not be the source of her disappointment anymore. He wanted to give up and send her to Scottsdale where they would spoon feed her every move and she could maybe qualify for the next level. He had to do something because he couldn’t stand her pain any longer. They were on the course this afternoon, let’s get this over with.

Jaime wandered out of his office feeling like shit. When he saw his beautiful Sassenach in Jag’s stall his heart skipped a beat, like always. He pulled her close and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered: “I love you.” Jaime hugged her and picked her up off her feet. “God, Sassenach, do ye have any idea how strong ye are? Do ye know how strong he is? Jag is one in ten thousand, he is that special. He’s right here.” He tickled her when he said it. “Yer one in far more than ten thousand lass.” He held her still and looked into her eyes. “I swear by my hope of heaven, ye could be invited to represent America abroad. There’s about thirty such riders. So that makes ye one in some number too big for me to figure out. This would all be so much easier if ye were just a good rider Claire, but yer not.”

Claire stared at Jaime and saw the honesty, heard the pleading, and felt him hand over her fate as an equestrian. What she heard is, ‘it’s all up to you to reach for the brass ring. She was crumbling under the weight of responsibility and she didn’t want it. She wanted his coaching, his suggestions to help her make better time, and he was just trying to bury her in the outcome. She snapped a lead on Jag and walked him to the trailer. She brightened at seeing Angus, “You’re coming right?” He shook his head, sorry lass. Claire felt her eyes burn with their betrayal. She wiped tears off her face and felt
they all abandoned her. "What was all that shit about riding abroad anyway?" She was talking out loud to Jag as he loaded. “Screw him, I have you and you’re better than him.” She said through her sobs. "All I need is you Jag. “Oh shit, oh no, he’s going to sell you! Oh my God, he going to sell you because I can’t make 420 Jag! I should say you can’t make 420, and why the fuck not?”

Claire didn’t want to let Jag go. She replayed every run they had done in the past month searching her mind for the problem. She saw them all so clearly and kept going back in time. She remembered the most painful run they had, right after she trained with Lance the first week. God, she could hardly endure the pain in her shoulders, arms, and chest. Her muscles were so sore it was a miracle she could even pull the reins at all. She remembered the pain in the water, coming up the hill, the straight away. Her arms were burning like fire! “Jesus Christ Jag! How could my arms burn like that…unless I was holding you back and you were fighting me. What the fuck? Jag! I had my leg on you and a crippling grip on your mouth!” The tears came like a dam breaking and she sobbed into Jag’s neck.

Jaime stood at the entrance to the barn and prevented anyone from exiting. He asked people to kindly wait five minutes and promised a ten percent discount on next month’s board if they could just wait five minutes. Angus watched Jaime from the other end of the barn and wanted to punch him. How could he leave the lass alone like that? He decided his friend was a real prick.

Claire forced the tears to stop and leaned into Jag. “You can do this Jag and I promise I won’t stop you this time. No matter what, you run your heart out today. For me.” She kissed him and pushed the loading ramp under the trailer. When the safety locks snapped Jaime materialized, “ye ready Sassenach?” Claire saw the stopwatch in his hand and her face turned to stone. It was a long quiet ride to Gilbert.

While Claire got Jag tacked up, Jaime was coming out of his skin. He walked away from her cold shoulder and gratefully answered his cell phone. Angus’s angry voice accused him of having a heart of stone and he hoped Claire would find someone who really cared about her. Click.

Claire mounted and told Jag if this was their last ride she wanted them both to remember it. I love you Jag. “I’m ready!” Jaime looked at her, “go!” His heart rate increased with each minute. He walked in circles, tried to play angry birds on his phone and finally gave in to the misery and the nerves. Christ, why was I so hard on her! It didn’t have to be today. You are a sadistic fuck!

Claire and Jag barreled down the first quarter and Jag was spot on for every jump. Claire felt strong because he was strong, she felt confident because he was confident. As a new object came into view his ears flicked forward with his focus and she could feel him waiting for her direction. He felt her leg and stretched to cover as much ground as he could. “Jesus Christ you’re a fast boy!” She yelled and felt him lurch forward. Jag felt hesitant suddenly, hardly noticeable, but she felt it. They came galloping around a turn and she saw the water. Her heart was pounding and she yelled: “go Jag!” His ears flicked forward and he pulled his back legs under him sailing over the hardest combination of the whole course and then leaped out of the water. She barely moved her pinky on the reins and he knew which way to go. “Go Jag!” She had her leg on him in the straight away. She asked him for more and he gave it. She could feel him listening to her. She debated about steering him away from the rocks like she always did. “Find your way through that shit, go Jag!” He lengthened under her and she kept her leg on him. She didn’t have a clue how to help him negotiate the last cluster of jumps at this speed. She wanted to slow him down because there was a tough direction change coming. She saw his ears flick forward when he saw the combination. “I trust you Jag” she yelled. “So go!” She remembered nothing after that. For the rest of her days, she would not remember that last leg of the course. Not until she was barreling up on the finish, and Jamie.

Jaime sat on the side of the truck in misery. He looked at his watch every minute or so and continued to berate himself for being so cruel. She won’t forgive me. I shouldna pushed her into eventing. The
lass isna cutthroat, not suited to this sport. Why didya think of that before she got her heart into it. She willna forgive me and it's my fault. I shoulda let Angus come and I shoulda kept Jag for her. Why did I have to draw a line in the dirt? I’m an idiot! Jaime looked at his watch and when he moved his head to look his ears heard hooves, galloping hooves. His watch said, yes you’re an idiot! He looked up at heaven looking for comfort and heard it again. He was sure this time he heard a horse at full gallop! He looked at the stopwatch…impossible.

Jaime jumped off the truck and ran to the fence at the finish line. He climbed up and stood on the top, holding onto a tree. He squinted looking for her. “Where are ye lass, I hear ye.” He saw the dust and his heart was racing, “c’mon Jag.” Then he saw them. Claire was yelling at Jag and he twitched an ear back toward her. He saw her leg on him and Jag leaping over the last fence. Claire was up in a jockey position yelling something at Jag. He watched her mouth and then he saw it, “go Jag!” Jaime was beaming and shouting at them. He clicked her in as they sped past him. Claire was slowing Jag down and screaming with delight. She dropped down on his neck and hugged him “did you see what we just did Jag! Oh my God!” Claire thought she would pass out from lack of oxygen but she didn’t care.

She saw Jaime looking at the stopwatch and punching numbers into his phone calculator. He was shaking his head and even shook the phone. “No!” Claire screamed and trotted over to him. Jaime held his phone up and finally let her see his incredulous face. "Five hundred, what does that mean Jaime!"

“Five hundred meters per minute!” He hugged Jag and pulled her off the saddle. “Sassenach, five hundred meters per minute! He hugged her tight and then looked down at her. Her eyes were huge and her mouth was open and smiling. When sound finally came out it was big. Jaime burned that moment into memory and when she jumped into his arms they sealed her victory with the best kiss possible with a dry mouth and a severe oxygen deficit.

Claire pulled Jag’s tack off and snapped a lead to him. He had to walk for quite a ways before they could load him. They walked the course and Claire pointed out where she battled herself, where Jag anticipated her slowing him down. How far into the water he jumped. Each complex jump had a story of courage, and trust, and teamwork. “Ye pushed him through the rocks didn’t ye” She looked up at Jaime and her eyes were rolling tears down her cheeks. “I yelled for him to figure it out and then I yelled go Jag.” She started to sob and Jaime held her close and rocked her. Jag was confused and rubbed his sweaty face on Claire’s back, almost knocking them over.

With Jag loaded, they headed for home and Jaime’s opportunity to ask her forgiveness.
It seemed to Claire like the whole barn was cheering. Boarders that she hardly knew were so plugged into her and Jag. Someone about her age came rushing up to Jag’s stall. “Oh my God Claire! 500 meters! So happy for you.” A few other people congratulated her and she was blown away. She would have to mention this to Jaime later. The happiest of them all was Angus and Rupert was a close second. Claire blushed fiercely at their praise.

She was overheated and sweating leading Jag to the wash rack. She pulled her hair into a ponytail and ran the water over Jag’s back letting it fall around his sides and haunches. She used Lots of soap and dug into his muscles, running her thumbs down the muscles on either side of his spine. Her muscles were shaking like they had no more to give and she felt the emotional exhaustion from the extremes of the day. She lavished his tail with soap and rinsed for a very long time because she laid her head against his butt and dozed while the water ran down his tail.

There was a great disturbance of her peace and her eyes flew open as Jaime lifted her into his arms and whistled for Pup. Then he gave the secret whistle and Angus and Rupert ran from two directions with a bewildered look on their faces. Jaime tossed Rupert the water scraper with orders to finish Jag and put him to bed. He tossed two leads to Angus and asked him to bring Fred and Ginger back from paddock-four where they had been turned out all day. He told Rupert he was in charge and reminded Angus sixty-eight was showing Hunter Jumper in three days. “Got it boss” Angus never could figure out the numbers. “The dumb one” Jaime shouted. They heard the truck start and leave and they looked at each other with confusion. “Isna he comin back today?” Rupert asked. Angus was already heading out to get Fred and Ginger. Rupert turned to Jag, “Ok ye big stud. 500 meters makes ye verra important around here. Rupert knew where to rub and Jag’s lips peeled back in delight.

Claire was giggling, “Jaime I need to skim my pool and put chemicals in it before it looks like pea soup.” Sorry Sassenach, I’m pullin in Just for a minute so ye can grab somethin to wear to dinner. Most lasses I see there have dresses on. It’s my mates place in the historic distinct. He is a cook worthy of my Sassenach.” Jaime smiled at her, “it’s time to celebrate.”

Claire stopped at her door and noticed Pup was not crashing into her calves. She turned around and saw his head out the window, tail wagging, standing on Jaime’s lap. “Trader.” Claire made for her closet and pulled out a clingy, comfortable summer dress with tiny straps, a shimmery shawl that felt like heaven and heeled sandals. She pulled special makeup and toenail polish into her purse. Lastly, she pulled out her new silk panties. She locked the door and jumped in the truck. “Your the perfect woman Sassenach,” Jaime told her as he clicked off his call. “Really, why is that?” He smiled at her, “ye’ll hear all about it tonight lass.”

Jamie led Claire into the big bathroom downstairs and told her to relax and soak while he finished his work in the study. “The rest of the day is just for my lassie.” He took her hands and kissed them. “I’m wantin ye to forgive me lass, more than my next breath. Do ye think ye might mo chridhe?” Before Claire could speak he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead. Then he was gone. Forgive him? Claire dropped her sore body into the hot bubbles and moaned, “God, this is heaven.” In truth, she was missing Jaime after the two-day tension. She felt him reach for her in the night and then let go. He was such an amazing, sweet, and talented man, and now he struggled with insecurity because of her.

He was her hero and before the night was through she would put him back on his throne, never to doubt again. She grabbed a fresh razor and tried to think of ways to thank him. She took extra time
on her hair and makeup, rimming her eyes with a soft brown pencil and jet black mascara. She had plenty of pink in her cheeks from the sun. She paced in the kitchen because she couldn’t think of something special. She could hear Jaime in the study talking on the phone. She was wrapped up in his terry robe when she tiptoed in and pointed at his laptop. He handed it to her and she took it to the kitchen. ‘Sex men like’, ‘how to make him feel my love’… bingo. She clicked through slide after slide of sensual photos of couples having sex. She heard her breath get louder, her eyes flicked up toward the study and then back down to see bodies in every configuration, pounding, kissing, touching, licking. “Sassenach.” She slammed the laptop closed, “What!” She seemed so young sometimes, he thought. Like now, looking like she got caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “Is ten minutes okay?” Her eyes were wide open like she just saw a ghost. She turned to the bedroom. Jaime narrowed his eyes at her retreating back. He knew that look, like a terrified catatonic. What have ye got into here lass? He opened the laptop and the slide show was still open. What the hell, he thought. Then he saw the banner, ‘Special Ways to Love Your Man.’ Jaime shook his head. Ye sweet, now troubled, lass. He put the laptop away and wondered how twisted she was. The door opened and Jaime felt the air go out of the room. Her dress was the color of her eyes, a shimmery shawl a bit lighter. Her hair was so fluffy it spanned shoulder to shoulder. Tiny straps were holding the dress up so she had to be braless he thought. “Yer beautiful Claire” he breathed. She smiled at him. Still acting a bit trance-like. Okay, the little Sassenach’s brain got scrambled doin something so sweet for me. “Sassenach.” She jerked her head up “What!” Jaime turned around and washed his hands, cleared his throat. Several times. When he stopped laughing he walked her to the truck. His hands ran down her back and he pulled her into a mind-bending kiss. She chased his mouth and tried to breathe.

She slid over before he could get in and she pressed into him. They drove toward Phoenix. He stole glances at this sweet but extremely aroused girl and knew he had to help her. “Sassenach,” he said softly. “I saw yer pictures on my laptop. His hand slowly caressed her inner thigh and she breathed out. Jaime watched her chest press into the dress rapidly and he licked his lips thinking about her bare nipples. “Will ye let me touch ye like that tonight? He breathed into her ear. “Yes… please.” Jaime pulled into a dark parking lot and grabbed a fist of hair pulling her head back and hovering an inch from her lips. She was panting and moaning as Jaime’s hand pushed her knees open and touched her so softly. “I’ll be doin way more this to ye lass, his thumb pressed into her, “and I won’t be askin.” He kept his mouth just above her lips and told her where he would touch her. He invaded her mouth and pushed her over the edge holding her close until she stopped shaking.

“Ah, welcome back my love. I was gettin a wee bit lonely with the other one. She does’na have much to say.” Claire was still a bit high so she just smiled. “I hope yer hungry Sassenach. This place is really special.” He drove deep into a narrow ally and parked. “Here?” She looked at Jaime. He held her when she stepped out of the truck. “Ye forgot a wee something when ye dressed tonight, aye?” Her eyes flew open “Jesus Christ! Where’s my..” He bent to her ear, “I will throttle any man who gets within three feet of ye.” Claire looked down the ally and was about to freak out and run for the truck when Jaime pushed an unmarked door open and the bright interior light blinded them both. Claire was smiling taking it all in. A jazz band in the corner. Gold albums signed by the old legends on the wall. A very happy and attractive man was holding court for diners who sat at a giant horseshoe bar with three grills spaced into it. She heard voices yell to Jaime. He shook hands with several people and she felt his happiness. "Claire this is Jazz, he owns the place, head chef, and sultry piano player." The handsome one bent forward to shake her hand. “You are a shining star in my establishment tonight Claire, thank you for comin.”

Diners came in throughout the night and Jazz gave Jaime and Claire a sample of whatever he cooked. People came over to talk with Jaime and flirt mercilessly with Claire. He pulled her chair so close she was touching him. They laughed, Claire blushed like a morning rose, and Jaime could feel she was having a good time. Jazz teased Jaime about staying away too long. Jamie raised his glass to
Claire and announced it was a celebration. “What, she finally turned eighteen?” someone yelled followed by laughter. Jazz was smiling and shaking his head at her, "I would stand on my head and spit nickels to keep those eyes pointed at me."

When the diners thinned out Jazz sat at the piano and his music carried Claire away. Jaime pulled her to the tiny dance floor and they swayed together. Jaime looked down at his dreamy lass and he was so happy she had a good time. He kissed along the top of her shoulder. “I need ye lass. It’s been two days since I felt ye sweet body under me.” He put his mouth to her ear, “will ye have me lass?” The piano, the dancing, and this gorgeous man in her arms were so potent she doubted they would make it home. They said their goodbyes and Claire saw Jazz, head back, eyes closed, feeling every note his fingers pulled from the keys. She kissed his cheek and whispered, “thank you for a wonderful evening.” He smiled, “tell that boyfriend of yours to bring you around more often baby.”

Jaime held the door and watched Claire’s ass all the way to the truck. Claire’s smile was bright when she thanked Jaime for a splendid evening. She still felt dreamy from the music and laid her head on Jaime while her hand played in her chest hair. When she touched his nipple she could feel her heat. Her hand moved down his stomach and pulled on his belt. She didn’t dare look at him because she didn’t want to be told no. She popped the button of his trousers and lowered the zipper. She heard him exhale when she wrapped her fingers around him. She touched the soft head and willed herself to go slow and just tease. Jaime’s erection was like concrete and putting her mouth around him so softly made him gasp. Slowly she pushed him into her mouth and moaned because this made her so hot. She found his balls and held them softly. She wanted to tease him so it was excruciatingly slow. Jaime, on the other hand, was doing fifteen miles over the speed limit and conjuring images of things meant to lessen the arousal. At the moment all he could see in his mind was Claire’s sweet lips on him. Finally, on Ironwood, he thought. He pulled over and pulled Claire up to crush her mouth. “There is a price to pay for teasin me for ten miles Sassenach. She was breathing heavy into his mouth asking him to hurry. “If ye knew what was about to happen to ye it might change yer mind lass.”

Jaime sped into the foothills leaving a dust cloud behind him. He walked her to the door and turned her toward him. “Sassenach, once that door closes, yer mine. Last chance to back out lass.” Claire giggled and spun around to punch in the alarm code. She pushed the light switch up and it was immediately dark again. Very, very dark. She felt his heat behind her and felt his hands push the tiny straps off her shoulders. One finger slipped inside the fabric to circle her nipple. “Do ye have excellent balance Sassenach?” She was breathing deeply feeling the extra stimulation of the unknown. Jaime walked her to the back of the sofa and lifted her dress off. He pushed her back until she made contact with the sofa back and gently pushed her down on the narrow top. Lay down, I’ll no let ye fall. Balance indeed she thought. It wouldn’t take much for her to topple to the ground. She was afraid to move her head and realized it didn’t matter, she couldn’t see him in this darkness anyway.

His warm hand caressed her from neck to ankle and he slipped her shoes off, careful to keep her steady. Then his soft hand crept up her calf, and thigh, and brushed against her heat so lightly. "Remember mo chridhe, keep yer balance.” The next thing she felt was Jaime’s wet tongue pressing between her legs. Her ankles were crossed because of the narrow surface. His tongue could get close to her throbbing but he couldn’t quite reach it. “Jaime please, Jesus let me get down.” Keeping her body still and balanced while Jaime probed her with his tongue, and the complete lack of vision due to the darkness was taking her down an intensely erotic path. She desperately wanted to open her legs and suddenly slipped just a bit. Her focus was instantly back to her balance and even though Jaime’s warm tongue was just millimeters from her clit she forced herself to relax and no longer thought of the finish. As her body relaxed and her taught muscles let go she felt his tongue wrap her throbbing bud and flick several times. She was panting, so close to orgasm. His tongue felt quite insistent suddenly and she felt her orgasm start as he flicked her harder until she crashed into the
erotic wind with an unexpected force. It pulled her to extreme heights and she moaned his name. He rolled her into his arms.

Claire felt Jaime climbing the stairs but the sensory deprivation from no sight made her feel like she was floating. Her back made contact with the bed and Jaime pulled her knees up and apart before he slid all the way into her. She heard him exhale and he pushed her knees to the bed so she was completely open. He thrust into her and she moaned and gasped when he pressed his body down onto her exposed clit. He moved slowly and pressed her each time until she quivered. “Come for me Sassenach” as he pressed harder. “I want to feel ye grip me lass. Ah, that’s my girl.” Claire moaned for a minute straight and heard Jaime gasp. He pulled out suddenly and she felt alone in the room. “Jaime?” She wanted her eyes to work. The darkness was making her crazy.

“I’m here lass” he turned the bathroom light on and closed the door to a couple inches.” He had two glasses of whiskey and passed one to her. Jaime pushed all the pillows against the headboard and pulled Claire to them. She laid back against the softness with a sigh and sipped the whiskey. Jaime tossed his back and slid up alongside her. “Jaime my body is buzzing like there’s a current going through it.”

He pulled her under him, “then it’s alright if I take it slow.” She pulled him to her, “always Jaime.” He kissed her long and soft while he entered her. He never looked away from her eyes. Claire was overcome with his tenderness and the way he looked at her. She could see his open heart in his eyes. She felt her eyes burning, “I want to own that expression forever.” He kissed her deeply, “ye already do lass.” Jaime’s heat was building and he pushed deep into her body and shuddered. He fell sideways and pressed his face into her hair, “I love ye lass. Please forgive me for bein a brute today.”

The tears were stinging her eyes when she held his face. For facilitating my breakthrough with jag, I forgive you. For helping me qualify for Novice, I forgive you. For holding Jag back for me, I forgive you. For showing me what true love feels like, and for loving me, I forgive you for that too. She kissed him tenderly and he pulled her to him.

Jaime spooned Claire until they both escaped into their own dreams. All through the night, one had a hand on the other.
When the first rays of light pierced the darkness of the pastures, paddocks, and barns, Jaime was leading Donus into the arena. For about thirty minutes daily he got out of his head and became part of Donus. Claire watched him from the bedroom window and was captivated. Her guilty pleasure in life was staring at this man when no one would see her. After his usual course of heart-stopping jumps he walked Donus smiling and laughing as he talked to him. Jaime jumped down and ran for the arena gate. It took Donus three seconds to gallop after him coming to skid stop at his right shoulder. Jaime looked up at the huge gelding laughing and rubbing his neck.

Claire watched Jaime, unguarded and playful. “In the distance between the arena and barn, the rider gives way to the businessman.” She said out loud.

Claire went home to work on her pool before meeting with Lance. She didn’t mind the weight training now that she wasn’t sore anymore. She knew she was stronger for it and that is what mattered. Lance had Claire lay on her side on the mat, one leg extended. He placed a thirty-pound disc on her inner thigh and told her to lift it off the ground. Jaime slipped into the gym and watched them from behind the observation window. Lance saw him, smiled and waved. Jaime could see Claire struggling. Her face was red and her leg was starting to shake. He saw her bare down and grit her teeth. Jaime was done watching her suffer and shot a look at Lance that said I’m going to kill you if you don’t let her stop. Lance laughed and shook his head no. Jaime couldn’t cope so he left and punched his truck before he got in.

He picked up his cell phone and dialed Lance’s number to leave a message.”Hey, it’s Jamie. Claire needs the best possible cardio boost she can get in three weeks. She can’t run like she wanted so can you give her some options. Thanks Lance, you and Missy should come for barbeque. As soon as we get back from Claire’s show we’ll do it.”

Jaime walked into the barn and almost ran into a striking gentleman waiting for Claire. Jaime decided he was Hollywood handsome with a British accent and impeccable manners. “I have an appointment with doctor Beauchamp. My name is doctor Ethan Grey.” Jaime felt his spine stiffen. “She willna be back soon, can I help ye with somethin.” Dr. Grey was almost as tall as Jaime, easily meeting his eyes. “Has she found someone to manage the equine therapy horses she brought from Boston?”

Jaime held his chin for a moment, “ah! Yes, she surely has. A very nice lass has already agreed and doctor Beauchamp trusts her implicitly. So… I can tell her ye came by.” Grey pulled a business card from his perfectly tailored breast pocket. “Thank you, sir. Who are you?” the doctor leaned in slightly. “Jaime Fraser.” ‘Her everything’ he wanted to say. He waved goodbye to the duped doctor and marveled at his complete lack of guilt or conscience.

Jaime had a secret he shared with no one, he smiled at the warmth he felt by it. That is my future wife yer askin about doctor Grey. She’ll no see the likes of ye until her name and mine are the same.

Jaime’s mam taught him about the sanctity of marriage that would bind him to one woman for the rest of his life. During his years as a rider, he often wondered if there could ever be one woman to claim his heart for eternity. He rather doubted It. His life was a smorgasbord of women that was continuously refreshed. He wondered if he would have seen Claire as unforgettable then. He rather thought he would. A diamond is a diamond no matter where or when you see it.

Jaime looked through his mail and pulled out a heavy linen envelope from the Arizona Equestrian Association. The annual auction to raise money for the coming year. Jaime always attended and donated something of value to do his part. He wasn’t crazy about cocktail parties with the elite but hopefully this year he would introduce his new rider and maybe pull the interest of new investors.
He brought back the image of Claire gritting her teeth to hold the weight up off the floor. The lass wants it. Like he wanted it. When she’s strong enough, she will pull the rest of Jag’s power out and they will be unstoppable. Jag was young, only five years old, and giving about fifty percent of his ability. If she wins Novice he could ask sixty thousand for him. But, it ceased being about the money a while ago. Maybe it was when he saw Claire sitting on the coral bars reading to him. Or when he first saw them jump the cross country. What he did know is Claire surrendered in a hail-Mary-ride and relied on Jag to see her through it. They went in as individuals, they came out as a team. Jag would be officially hers when the transfer of ownership was complete. It will be a surprise and she will be over the moon. What troubled him was Jag might be the very thing that takes her away from him. If she is invited to show abroad will she go? Jaime had to love her enough to let her choose her path, and he would.

Claire was helping Rupert get the horses brushed and wrapped for transport to the show. She was riding the two remaining greenies in equitation, dressage, and hunter jumper. She wanted them to sell so she could get them off her to do list.

Fred and Ginger got a warm goodbye hug and Claire felt her guilt rising. She ran an online ad for an equine therapy manager and emailed back and forth with numerous interested people. One man stood out. A fellow equestrian and partner in a four-physician pediatric practice. He had the children in need of Fred and Ginger’s special talents and boundless love. She never met the man but he left word at the barn that his plans had changed. Too bad she thought.

She only had two more weeks to prepare for the horse trials in Palm Springs. Lance bumped her routine up to include twenty minutes of incline treadmill after every session with him. She hated it but really wanted to live through the four brutal miles of cross country they would ride.

Horses loaded, tack stowed, food loaded into Angus’s truck, they were ready to go. Jaime whistled for Pup but no soft brown dog bounded out of the barn. Claire’s heart was in her throat and she started running straight to Jag’s stall. One of the Pony club kids was playing her music excessively loud until Claire’s finger hit the ‘off’ button. Then she heard it. There was only one dog in the world who hupped and she found him growling and pulling on Jag’s halter and hupping to make him stand up. Jag was having none of it and opted to lay in his wood chips and sleep. “C’mon Pup. It’s Jag’s day off and we gotta roll.” She walked briskly back to the truck and Pup was already in Jaime’s lap, tongue out, and panting. “Jesus! I should be sitting in his lap, panting with my tongue out you little idiot.” Jaime laughed as did Claire and they were off.

The show was the usual fun, chaotic, two days of events. Rupert and Angus got drunk in the hotel bar, Jaime met with buyers, and Claire’s riding was flawless winning her three of the four events she entered. Her one loss was from number 68 almost falling asleep midway through an eleven jump course. Both horses sold so they would be hauling an empty trailer back tonight.

When she got back the hotel she showered and laid on the bed naked feeling dreamy and worn out. Her eyes closed and she slipped in and out of sleep. She dreamed that Jaime’s mouth was kissing her between her legs. She felt his tentative tongue slip in and out of her. She heard herself panting his name and soon figured out this was no erotic dream. His fingers were invading her and tongue flicked her heat until she was groaning. Her legs opened and he finished her savagely. “Claire was launched into the exquisite bliss while her body pulsed. Jaime kissed her several times before she opened her eyes. “Why are you clothed? Come here and let me fix that.” He stilled her hand.

“Canna, must meet the guys for dinner and get on the road.” Claire made a face. That hardly seems fair.” Her sleepy smile made Jaime weak. “I have somethin for ya once yer dressed.”

Claire gathered her purse and gave Pup a kiss. “No hupping” she scolded pointing at him. Before she could reach the door Jaime grabbed her and popped the button on her jeans. He lifted her sweater
and exposed her nipples. Then he kissed her, long and deep. Asking for her tongue. Claire felt him
dab something on her nipples and between her legs. She broke the kiss as he was fixing her sweater
and buttoning her jeans. “What on earth was…Christ! What is that, what is so, God almighty, so, oh
shit, Jaim…it is so hot.” He smiled at the look of pure arousal on her face. “Ready Sassenach?” She
was not able to speak at the moment so he pulled her along. Now Claire, you must pull yourself
together he laughed. She walked stiffly, eyes half closed, smiling. Jaime pulled her into the restroom
hallway and kissed her. When he touched her nipple she gasped loudly. “I'm not hungry Jaime lets
order room service. He pulled her along to the restaurant.

The guys congratulated Claire on her wins but she was distracted and flighty. “Ah, myyyyy wins…
hmm,” several seconds passed, “ah, thank you gentlemen.” Rupert and Angus looked at Jaime with
eyebrows raised. “Oh, we started celebratin and Claire’s a bit of a lightweight with alcohol. In other
words, the lass is hammered.” The guys were very appreciative of Claire’s condition like she had
been inducted into the good-ole-boys club. If either of them had known the look of an aroused
woman the ruse would never have worked. Claire would look at each of them now and then and
wonder what the conversation was about. Then she would sit back in her chair and feel the magic
going on between her legs. Jaime watched her eyes sparkle like diamonds. Her erratic breathing was
making it hard for him, literally.

Claire was coming back to her senses as dinner was finishing up. Jaime had her dinner in a container
because she didn’t take a bite. He shouted for the guys to be careful on the road and they were gone.
Once everything was in the trailer they pointed toward Phoenix. Jaime handed Claire a small jar that
said Kuma Sutra on it. Inside was a green gelatinous substance that smelled divine. “Is this what you
put on me?” Jaime smiled sheepishly, I'm sorry lass! I dinna expect your reaction, just wanted to
surprise ye with something nice.

It was pushing ten o’clock when they were still an hour away from Phoenix. Claire unbuttoned her
shirt and removed it. Jaime paid close attention. She removed her bra and dabbed the green stuff on
her nipples. It took about twenty seconds before she started to purr. Next, she took off her boots and
pants. Now in her tiny panties, she dabbed the goo on her heat. There was just enough time to smile
up at Jaime before, “Oh, Christ! That is, wow… Jaime, ooh it’s getting hotter! He couldn’t watch
her wiggle in delight because he was cutting straight across the desert to put some distance between
them and the road. He held Claire back when he skidded to a stop and jumped out of the truck. He
spread out a bedroll that was kept in the trailer for emergencies and this was the very definition of an
emergency.

Claire leaned back on the seat and closed her eyes because the feeling of the gel was so intense. She
felt Jaime’s arms come under her and she smelled the amazing desert. He laid her on the blanket and
started ripping his clothes off watching her spread her legs wide and arch her back. “Holy mother of
God” he whispered. He slid next to her and put more goo on her nipples before he sucked one into
his mouth. Claire almost screamed. “That is wow.” She forced her eyes open and asked Jaime to sit
up on the side of the truck. When he did she put her face in his lap and Jaime closed his eyes when
her warm wet mouth wrapped around the head of his cock before it slid down him. She rocked back
on her heels and then forward until he banged into her throat. She held him and buried her face in his
balls coming back to slide her mouth around him again. “Jesus yer good at that lass.” Her eyes shot
up to his in delight as she tried to say “really?” But having her mouth full at the moment it was
unintelligible. Jaime grabbed her shoulders and dropped onto is back pulling her to straddle him.

She lifted up and dropped her body down on him and gasped. Jaime couldn’t help smiling at his
uninhibited lover who was demanding, and bold, and highly aroused. It had been weeks since she
was in this position and her mind went blank except for the non-stop porn going on in her head...
“Lass?” Claire wasn’t moving. She tried so desperately to remember. Jaime could see the goo was
wearing off and he finally realized that she didn’t know how to move. “I'm sorry lass.” He sat up
inches from her face. Rolled her to her back, “look up love.” She gasped at the sky so full of stars. Another moonless night like when they went to Silly mountain.

Jamie was pushing her legs open. Claire tried to keep her eyes open, watching the amazing sky but Jaime’s tongue won and she peeled off for another trip into her orgasm. Jaime laid beside her, his cock like a granite club and waited for Claire. He was definitely getting rid of the gel. It was a bit much for his sweet no-brake Sassenach. But…it won’t hurt to use a little more out here in the desert. He put a large dab on her nipples and clit and counted from twenty to “God…..damn! Ooooh, hot, so hot! Oh my, yesss.” She was squeezing her thighs together so Jaime gently pushed them apart. When the cool night air hit her core she went silent and arched her back pushing her legs open wider. She was panting and asked “please touch it. Right now, touch me.” she whispered. He sucked her nipples and she reached for his hand pulling it to her. “ah, ye want me to touch ye here where ye so wet and swollen? He wasn’t moving his fingers so she moved her hips against them. Jaime was ready to explode watching Claire in this hyperaroused state.

Jaime gave Claire the most exquisite orgasm. When she dropped back to earth she wanted more. "I want you to pound into me and not hold back Jaime, I need a brute right now." One brute coming up! He thought. He spun her around, “drop down to your elbows lass.” When she did he drove himself deep into her. Thrust after thrust she moaned and cried out. His arm came around her and he pulled her up against his chest then pushed her legs wide and sinking deep into her body. “Oh God Jaime!” He pumped her over and over, pushing deep into her. He flipped her around and her legs were up in the air. She wanted nothing in the way of what was coming. He thrust into her, “are ye gonna come for me lass?” He drove into her again. She was panting and growling as Jaime pushed deep into her scraping his stomach against her throbbing. When he knew she was tumbling he let himself become the brute she asked for and finally exploded deep inside her. They clung together, panting and dripping with sweat. She pressed her face into his neck. “God I love you Jaime.”

“Sassenach, if ye get any better at doin what ye do to me I will lose my mind,” he panted. He buried his face in her hair and growled pulling great giggles from a smiling Claire. Once they were dressed and back on the road Claire turned on the radio and sang to the western songs. “I am starving! Got any cookies or peanuts in here?” She ran her hand along the cubbies and the dash, looked in the glove box, and her hand ran into the Styrofoam container with her dinner. She leaned her back against Jaime and stuck her feet out the window while she ate ribs and sang him home.
Chapter 20

Claire had taken over the downstairs bathroom to prepare for the Equestrian Association auction tonight. She headed for the Scottsdale high-end shops early in the week and flat-out got lucky. She looked at her dress hanging on the door and couldn’t wait to put it on. The number of times she had gotten dressed up like this she could count on one hand, more like half of a hand. The two hours in a salon getting her hair coiffed, and a manicure for her battered fingernails was worth it. She looked at her hands and wondered how many days she could keep them nice like this.

Pulling up her tiny panties and clasping her strapless bra she bent deep at the waist to pull her breasts up into the cups. Next, she pulled up beautiful stockings with a very pretty two-inch lace top and slipped her feet into barely-there, four-inch straps that felt like an old friend. She looked approvingly at her face and silently thanked the salon for showing her new techniques and products that were more contemporary. She looked at the clock, she had to time this just right.

When Jaime said they would leave at seven o’clock, that meant he was punching in the alarm code at seven sharp. It was now three minutes to seven, it was time. “Jaime! Oh my God, Jaime!” He came running into the bathroom and stopped dead in his tracks. She was hopping from one foot to the other saying a mouse ran across her foot. She unzipped the dress and stepped into it backing up so Jaime would zip it up.

Jaime was stunned mute. Her spike heels, long slender legs in very sexy stockings, thong panties that made him want to hold and squeeze her robust cheeks. Her stomach was so toned leading up to a very sexy lace bra. When she hopped her breasts bounced enticingly and he wanted to touch them. “Jaime? Jaime, will you zip me please?” He was looking at her hair, so pretty, he wanted to touch it. Uh oh, she asked him something. “What… a…Sassenach?” Perfect! Claire thought. Better than she hoped for and fitting payback for the Kuma Sutra gel before dinner with the guys. “Jaime?” He was looking at her sexy shoes and wanted to touch them. “Yes! Sassenach, a mouse ye say. Oh, let me get that zipper.” As the dress closed around her she felt like Cinderella going to the ball. Poor Jaime, on the other hand, was quite befuddled with legs, thong, and all the things he wanted to touch.

Claire bent forward over the vanity to apply her lipstick and Jaime’s eyes surveyed the black beaded form-fitting dress. His hands touched her amazing ass and he was in total cerebral shut-down. His reptilian brain told him he could have this beautiful creature. He just had to hold her down and take her. “Jaime, sweetheart, we should go.” Claire grabbed the matching shawl and draped it through her elbows. When she walked to the door she exaggerated the swing of her hips. She stopped at the door and Jaime almost ran into her. “Jaime, where’s your jacket?” Jaime looked down. “My jacket is…” Claire walked to the study to retrieve the jacket and held it open for him. She straightened his tie and put her hands on his cheeks giving him an air kiss before she spun around and walked outside. My God Claire, she thought, mission accomplished now stop teasing.

Jaime came out looking a bit undone and Claire wondered if he remembered how to drive at the moment. She put her arms around his waist and hugged him. Then she listed the first five things she would do to him when they got home. His smile was dazzling and her heart almost hurt looking at him. “Jamie Fraser, I pity every girl who isn’t me right now,” she said softly feeling all the love for him. The tender moment didn’t last.

“Well now, that looks like a lass ye got there Jaime boy! And a verra pretty one too.” Rupert and Angus approached them and looked at Claire approvingly. “What are you staring at?” She giggled. “Tomorrow when ye covered in horse shit I’ll have this picture in my head to compare ye to,” Rupert said. “We’re late so see ye tomorrow.” Jaime nudged Claire to the truck which was freshly washed
and waxed. It took her a moment to figure out how to climb in without ripping her tight dress. Jaime grabbed her waist and lifted her to the seat. “I do so love those muscles,” she said smiling.

Jaime looked at her every moment he could without driving his truck into a pole. He had escorted many women to all kinds of functions but never had he felt so honored, or proud.

Claire pulled a tissue from her purse and wiped her lipstick off. At the next red light, she kissed him deeply and Jaime’s head spun. When horns were honking he reluctantly broke the kiss and they continued to what would be a very interesting evening.

The Princess hotel was opulent by Phoenix standards. Walking into the grand ballroom she was relieved Jaime’s first order of business was the bar. Claire sat comfortably and Jaime looked down at her shapely legs crossed inches in front of his growing groin. He ran a finger around her Deltoid muscle and marveled at how her body was changing. Still feminine, achingly so, but he saw the muscle underneath. He wanted to touch it.

Claire was introduced as Dr. Beauchamp, his rider. Anyone watching them would see they were crazy for each other. One set of brooding eyes could not keep her eyes off of them and her mood became stormy and hateful. Laoghaire had prepared all week to see Jaime tonight. She spent a small fortune on her dress and knew they would patch things up if she could just get him alone. When she saw the doctor walk in with him she nearly threw up. She watched Claire smiling and laughing, touching Jaime’s arm or his back. Jaime wouldn’t go more than three feet from her. Laoghaire waited for an opportunity to speak to Jaime, even if it took all night.

Later in the evening Claire found the ladies room and refreshed her lipstick. She heard someone in the adjoining sitting room, on the phone apparently. “Jaime says he can’t wait to get back together with me. Yes, I think he might propose! Seriously! No, he wants me back as his rider too and said the other one was just filling in and woefully lacking in skill.” It didn’t take Claire long to realize it was Laoghaire and she wanted out of there without an incident. She waited, praying someone else would come in. “Well, well, well. Look who is here with my boyfriend.” Claire looked at Laoghaire standing in the doorway between the two rooms. Great, she thought, now I’m cornered. Please someone come in here.

Laoghaire walked slowly toward Claire looking her up and down. When she walked behind her, Claire made for the door but was quickly blocked by Laoghaire. “What could you possibly want with me you sick fuck?” Laoghaire was just inches from Claire’s face looking at her dress, her hair, her eyes. “Yes, I was sick at heart when those morons couldn’t rape you like they were supposed to. Idiots. They wouldn’t have taken turns ya know. They would have double-teamed you like I told them. One down your throat, choking the life out of ye, the other in your ass. Not to worry, Phoenix has no shortage of crackheads looking for a twenty dollar bag.”

Claire heard the door open and two talkative women came in. Thank God, she thought. Once she was out in the hall she started shaking. She needed to calm down quickly and slowed her pace. She changed her mind at the thought Laoghaire might come after her and made a beeline for Jaime.

It took all of five seconds to see Claire was completely undone. “Would ye like to see the pool Sassenach?” She nodded her head yes and they walked out the French doors. “What happened mo chridhe, ye look like ye saw a ghost?” Claire was taking deep breaths, “Laoghaire.” Jaime held her to him, “I’m sorry lass. We’re gettin out of here but I have to make a phone call.” He pulled a card from his wallet and called the same officer as last time. “Can ye speak to the officer Claire? He says it’s important.” Claire answered his questions and told him how she approached her, blocked her, and threatened her. Jaime was coming apart at the seams. She handed Jaime the phone. Jaime verified he had the restraining order for himself and Claire and that it had been served by a marshall. He clicked
off and held Claire again feeling absolutely miserable. “We’re leavin lass and no need to walk 
through the ballroom again. The valet is right around the corner.” She put a hand on his arm, “Jaime 
I can stay, I’m fine.” He was struggling, “I’m not fine.”

He pulled Claire next to him in the truck and held her hand tightly. He didn’t speak so Claire 
remained silent. Jaime poured a whiskey for each of them and had two in him before Claire took her 
first sip. She felt helpless watching him pace with his fists clenched. The doorbell rang and Jaime let 
the officer in. Claire shook his hand and thanked him for helping. He had a statement typed for her to 
sign and explained that a Phoenix officer had to do the arrest. He was sure she would be back in jail 
tonight on violation of the restraining order and more importantly, violation of probation. Do you 
want a call when we bring her in?” Jamie said yes and saw the officer out.

Jaime poured two more whiskeys and held out his hand for Claire. They sank into the thick mattress 
of the lounge outside and just held each other. Jaime remained silent and they both drifted off to 
sleep.

In the early morning hours when the temperature dipped, Jaime woke up and carried Claire upstairs. 
He unzipped her dress and stayed her hand from taking anything else off. He led her to the bathroom 
and stood behind her pulling all the pins out of her hair. He kissed her neck and ran his hands up the 
back of her legs and over her ass.

“After what happened to ye tonight, my first words have to be how sorry I am for exposin ye to an 
insane woman who cares nothin for others and far less for ye. I am deeply sorry ye had to go through 
that tonight, ken? It was terrifying to hear the details of what she told those men to do. I dinna want 
to bring it all up again Claire I just want to say it and get it out of me. Do ye need to say it love? Do ye 
want to speak with the trauma officer who came to ye place that night?” He took her hand and led 
her to the bed where he laid down and held her close. Claire was definitely scared but her gut was 
telling her Jaime was far worse and she wanted him to talk about it. His body was contracted, 
everywhere. He felt like a coiled spring locked in that position. She remembered the saying ‘the 
longest journey for a man is from his head to his heart’. His head surely wanted to stop Laoghaire by 
any means while his heart was locked in fear. Did he fear she would run? She couldn’t tell him it 
was her only thought leaving the restroom.

Claire kissed him and got out of bed. She filled a bowl with very hot water and grabbed the massage 
oil from the downstairs bathroom. One of the pampering gifts Jaime stocked for his sister. It was 
from an aromatherapy line of products and smelled amazing. She grabbed a sheet and covered a 
chair in his room. With a candle lit and the oil warming, she sat next to him on the bed and 
unbuttoned his shirt, placing his hands at his side when he tried to stop her. “This isn’t about sex 
Jaime. I want to help you process the feelings that are crippling you tonight.” She pulled his cuff 
links out and pulled him up to remove the rest of his clothing. Her heart was breaking for him.

The oil was warm and spread soothingly across the expanse of shoulder and back muscles. Claire 
pressed her fingers into the muscle and pressed along the direction of its attachment. His neck 
muscles were like concrete, she would come back to those. She pulled him up to lean against her 
stomach and she spread the oil over his chest. Jaime closed his eyes and let himself fall into this 
incredible experience. The aroma of the oil was emotionally soothing somehow. He could only 
equate the feeling with his mother coming for him when he was sick at school. When he buried his 
face in her neck her smell instantly calmed him. He let it go. The anger, and the fear, his hatred, and 
helplessness. Claire’s fingers running down his muscles was breaking him out of the ice block he 
was trapped in.

Claire unclasped her bra hoping to save it from the oil. She pulled Jaime’s head back against her for 
access to his Pectoral muscles and continued to run her thumb across them until they became supple.
Jaime was moaning as she released what he could not. She pushed his knees apart and pressed his head against her chest to do the same to his neck muscles. Jaime rubbed his palms over his oily chest and brought them up the back of her legs and covered her cheeks until they were slippery. God what a feeling, he thought and wanted more. His palms stole more oil from where she was working and he brought them up to cover her back. Neither of them spoke because they were lost in the feel of the other. Jaime smoothed oil on her sides and down her shoulders and he squeezed as he ran his hands down her arms, butt, and legs.

Claire felt her growing heat and tried to control her breathing. She wanted him to possess her and take her to a place they could only go together. She continued pushing her fingers deep into the muscles of his neck which pressed him against her chest. Jaime opened his eyes and watched her breast move and bounce with her movements. When she leaned over to work deeper into his back he pulled her into his mouth and heard her gasp. Ok, he thought, that means go in any language. Swiping more oil from his neck he covered her thighs and ran his fingers under the tiny patch of fabric in her thong before rolling them off of her. He took control of the situation and felt Claire’s body willing and hungry.

Jaime pulled her onto his lap and felt her hips roll forward seeking friction. She kissed him and invaded his mouth with her soft tongue playing with his, igniting a current that went from his brain to his balls. His hands smoothed oil in the places he could not reach before and they both gasped for air and went back down in the infinite kiss. Claire broke away and dropped her head back panting. She wrapped her warm oily hands around him and slowly smoothed them down his length. “God lass” let me feel ye, please.” She dropped her body around him and he held her down letting the exquisite feeling roll through them. Claire felt the floor on her tiptoes and pushed herself up and down slowly hearing Jaime moan before he held her down again. He stretched his legs out in front of him and pushed deeper into her body. She was so slippery he could barely hold onto her.

Jaime was in a perfect place thanks to his love and he wanted to slow down and bring her with him. He stopped her movement and looked at her face seeing the lingering signs of stress. He whispered, “you are my angel and I love ye with my heart, my head, and my body. Trust that I will keep ye safe, and guard yer dreams until they’re real. Trust mo chridhe.” He stretched his legs in front of him again and gently pushed her back until she was laying on them. He touched her exposed heat and she moaned but didn’t move. Jaime pulled her leg up and hooked it on the inside of the armrest, the same for the other leg. She felt her legs stabilize her deep angle. “Use yer legs lass.” He reached for the oil and spun Claire’s body into pure erotic sensation. “Sassenach pull with yer legs.” Claire was panting so hard she barely heard him. He put his hand on her thigh and told her to pull. Suddenly she contracted both legs and felt him slide into her. “Jesus Jaime!” She could pull him as deep as she wanted and as fast as she wanted, and this, she decided, was spectacular. Jaime continued to touch her but kept it light so she could stay where she was and let it build. She lifted her hands over her head and grabbed his calves to push with her arms as well as her legs. Jaime tried not to look at where her body opened for him because it was the most erotic thing he had ever seen. He was holding back.

Time was suspended for Claire. She had no name or existence, there was no room or house around her, only Jaime, and the hungry wave that rocked her to the core. She pushed her body into him and he filled her, she pressed him and heard him gasp. When he touched her with oily fingers she lost control and crashed into him over and over until she screamed his name. Claire’s muscles gripped him so hard he could feel them contracting against him, pulling him in. He grabbed her hips and pulled her into him until he exploded deep in her body. He watched his cock pulse into her sweet body, holding him inside her. He dropped his head back and felt wave after wave hit him while he gasped for breath. As he floated back to reality he was overcome with gratitude. “Give me your hands love.” Claire was fighting back to the surface and brought her arms up to seek his strong hands. He pulled her straight into his kiss where their tongues danced slow, locked in each other's
It was an hour before dawn and something unsettling brought the horses out of their slumber. They felt the evil creeping along the main aisle and whinnied to each other in fear. Jag was in the last stall and peered down the aisle watching it. He felt no alarm. He just watched until it was gone. An engine roared to life and spinning tires shot rocks out like bullets behind it. The car backed up in front of the large door and the tires spun under a racing engine shooting rocks into the barn, pinging of corral bars and hitting several horses.

Jaime’s head jerked up, listening. He heard the panic and pain in their whinnies and shot out of bed. He was running toward the barn, his legs were burning and he ran harder. He could see tail lights racing down the hill. He ran down the aisle checking each horse. He was gasping for breath when he saw Donus pressed into a corner. He called to him and Donus snorted loudly and stamped his feet. Jaime forced himself to breathe and calm down. The horses could sense his fear and what they needed was the steady hand of a hero right now. Jaime extended his arm into Donus’s stall then he put his head down and spoke the Gallic prayer of courage, strength, and love. He spoke quietly and felt the tears of frustration and fear drop to the ground. Donus put his soft muzzle into Jamie’s hand and when he came close enough Jaime hugged him and repeated the prayer.

Claire was frozen in place watching Jaime’s heartbreak. When she saw him hug Donus she thought she might suffocate from the heart lodged in her throat. For the second time tonight she felt a slap to her consciousness and her mind yelled to move and see to the injuries. She assessed each horse swiftly and rendered first aid to minor cuts. One horse had a rock embedded in his neck. She calmed him and gently squeezed deep in the tissue until the rock oozed forward where she extracted it.

As she worked she heard Rupert and Angus run into the barn calling for Jaime. When three highlander men focus their anger on the same object, it’s best to get out of their way. She stayed in the stalls going from one to the other. When she opened Jags stall she felt her heart beating fast and she smiled at him, fit as a fiddle. He actually seemed unmoved by the ordeal and sniffed her pockets for a treat. She laughed and patted his neck. Thankfully, Fred and Ginger had been turned out for the night in a back pasture. It took one heartbeat for her to see Laoghaire lure them to the fence and then…

Claire was running for their lives and praying, “please God, please God.” She was almost to the pasture fence and started calling for them. Where the fuck are they! “Fred! Gin!” It was still dark but she should have heard them by now. She yelled again, “Fred! Gin.” She stopped, feeling the rumbling in the ground. She scanned the darkness hearing the whinny of galloping horses. They ran up to her and she felt along every inch of them trying to stop the tears. She breathed a sigh of relief knowing they were fine. “You guys stay out here today.” She closed the gate and felt the cold, bone-deep hatred take hold of her.” Jaime won’t lay a hand on you if I get to you first, she thought.
Jaime didn’t say much to his friends on the phone. They knew there was big trouble before they bounded into the barn ready for war. He decided on brutal honesty and they would hear it as Claire heard it. Angus was on his feet sending the chair into the wall. His eyes were huge with fury. Rupert was taking deep breaths with his hand on his chest. “Why couldn’t this fight be with a man!” Angus shouted. Jaime waited for them to settle down and continued with Laoghaire’s visit to the barn. Both men were on their feet and Jaime asked them to please sit. “We have to make a plan before Claire is hurt or the barn burns down with the horses in it.”

Rupert asked why she hadn’t been arrested yet. “She was no longer at the Princess when Phoenix PD arrived to arrest her. She was not at her home when Mesa PD came to arrest her. The Mesa officer I’ve been workin with stays in contact, thank Christ, or I might lose my mind. Because of the previous attempt and her threat to have Claire killed they are posting officers to watch her house until she is caught. It won’t be long now.” Jaime let out a long exhausted breath.

Rupert and Angus took their seats as the gravety of the threat became crystal clear in their heads.

Claire paced in front of Jag’s stall. He watched her but after several minutes he kicked the bars and Claire almost jumped out of her skin. “Oh, sorry. I bet that’s irritating to watch someone pace.” She had to do something or lose her mind. She left a note for Jaime on the board. ‘Checking Fred and Ginger, back soon’. Claire grabbed two apples from the supply she kept in the tack room and walked to the back pasture again. Once inside she sat on the fence facing the sunrise. Now that she was alone there was no stopping the tears which were soon sobs. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and cried so hard it brought Ginger to her. She handed her an apple but could not speak. Fred bumped her arm on the other side and looked directly into her eyes. Claire thought, not for the first time, that somehow he knew she was hurting. She handed him an apple. Ginger wandered away to eat grass but Fred continued to bump her arm until she turned around facing him. She jumped off the fence and rubbed his belly until her arms were sore. “I’m okay Fred. Just needed to get that out.”

Rather than go back to the barn she walked to the house to let pup out. She grabbed bagels and cream cheese and a couple knives for the guys. Back at the keypad she looked around for Pup and saw him in her peripheral vision running full speed for the barn. She was too far to hear him hup but she saw his mouth move like he was barking. He was jumping up to see Jag over the half door when she heard it. Pup barked and then ran under a bush with his tail between his legs. Claire punched the numbers and ran toward the barn. Jag had lowered his head so Pup could lick him then he ran for Claire. He had so much energy she just sat down on the grass until he barreled into her. He circled her sniffing and poked his nose in her chest, stomach, armpits, and hair, finally pulling a giggle out of her. She put her hands up in surrender.

Odd behavior from this little dog, well, not so little anymore. Why hightail it to Jag’s half-door and run back? “It’s because you are a silly pooch in love with a horse, who is a boy same as you. Just sayin.” Claire and Pup walked back to the barn with the bagels. She could see her trailer as she walked. She could be packed, lease broken, horses loaded, and headed somewhere far from here by noon. She could ditch her cell phone and never have to speak to Jamie Fraser again. Colorado didn’t have a six-month wait for transfer of medical license. She could be in an operating room by next month. Colorado did not have the heat and definitely had better horse shows. Colorado had the Rocky Mountains and amazing small towns, like Loveland, where she attended a conference. She loved it there. She could be headed there by noon. She felt hot tears again, then the sobs. Pup humped at her, obviously worried, and another bark came out scaring the shit out of him. He sat on his tail and pressed against her leg shaking and looking around. Claire wiped tears away and looked down.
at him. She felt him shake and started laughing. He was still looking around for the bigger dog that barked at him. Claire dropped to her knees and hugged him. She was sobbing and laughing at the same time. “That was you who barked Pup and you’ll do it again, many times. Don’t be scared. He looked up at her and licked her face. Somehow he knew he had much to be scared of right now.

Pup planted his butt on the road and refused to get up or even look at Claire. He reminded her of a two-year old that put his blanket over his head because it was safe under there. How could he not feel the shift in the energy. Dog’s were amazingly perceptive. Claire called Jaime’s cell. “I am sorry to interrupt but Pup is sitting in the middle of the road and won’t get up. He’s scared of something I think. Anyway, you can whistle for him?” Before a minute passed they heard Jaime’s distinctive whistle and Pup’s head whipped in his direction. Claire was calling him and trying everything she knew to get him up. Pup just stared at Jaime but wouldn’t get up. Claire tried to pick him up but his body went limp and he was just too heavy. She watched the road in both directions praying a car would not be barreling up on them.

“Well, Laddie, ye got yer butt stuck to the road did ye?” Jamie saw his ears pressed back against his head and the tail tucked tightly between his legs. “Looks like the lad got a snoot-full of somethin that scared him to the marrow.” He scooped Pup into his arms and carried him to the soft grass. Claire watched Jaime drop to his back and lay quietly while Pup walked a few steps, tail tucked and head down. She was so grateful that Jaime would take the time to lay in the grass when air-raid sirens were going off in his world. “Maybe we can get ye mistress to join us?” Jamie looked in Claire’s eyes and his heart nearly stopped. He held his arm out to her smiling but his mind was in a meltdown. No, no, no, Sassenach, don’t run, don’t leave. Sweet Jesus I can see what yer thinkin and ye will tear my heart out if ye do this. He wanted to beg her and promise her everything. Claire laid down and put her arm around his waist. Pup walked around them and the tip of his tail was moving back and forth but still tucked between his legs. The danger was still somewhere close by. He could feel it.

“Sassenach. Dogs are perceptive, more than we give them credit for, I know it. Pup is afraid of what ye were thinking right before he sat down.” Jaime lowered his voice. “I’m afraid of what ye were thinkin too mo chridhe. Don’t go Claire, please don’t run. I’ll spend the rest of my days lookin for ye, be sure of that. I won’t ever stop lookin for ye love.”

Claire was full of fear and in the throws of fight or flight. Laoghaire’s taunting played on an endless loop in her head. They were sent to kill her in the vilest way humanly possible. She felt Jaime under her arm and hand. He was solid, and real, and promising to protect her. She heard his honesty. He would turn his back on the business, horses, and clients and drive down unknown highways looking for her. She had not put his loss into the equation. If she ran away, Angus and Rupert would lose Jaime and the life they have built here. What would happen to Jag if she ran out on him? He could end up under one of those sadistic Olympians or worse. She saw the domino blocks crash into one another as the interconnected lines all fell. That’s what would happen if she ran away. Like it or not she was a part of something bigger than her. Like a family. Her eyes closed against tears and she felt them come in sobs that gripped her stomach and she clung to Jaime. She felt his strong arms come around her. “Oh God, my God Jaime. I could never, would never leave you.” As her body shook with tears her mind cleared and she understood the team was like a family. She would rather fight to the death than leave them.

“I’m sorry Jaime. Can you forgive me for thinking such selfish things? I love you too much to leave no matter what the threat is. I love all of you too much. Please say you forgive me!” Jaime held her close and kissed the top of her head. “There’s nothin to forgive, ye ken?” She looked up at him, “what?” Jaime smiled when he looked in her eyes. He saw her clarity and resolve. Thank Christ, he thought. Claire needed forgiveness, absolution for considering something devastating to those who loved her. “Ye need to forgive the Laddie for sittin in the road and tryin to kill ye.” Claire looked
incredulous, “that’s not why he sat down. He was so scared he couldn’t move. There is nothing to forgive!” As the words tumbled out of her mouth her mind saw the parallel. She jumped on top of Jaime hearing him grunt before she kissed him everywhere she found skin. Jaime was laughing and making her work for every landing. He held her face and said, “every fiber and cell in me thanks ye Claire. I gave ye my heart and when survival instincts were screamin at ye to run, ye hunkered down and protected it.” He kissed her with all the love and gratitude he felt and she did the same.

They walked back to the barn with Pup on their heels, wagging his tail and jumping happily at bugs in the air, real or imagined.

Claire spoke to Rupert and Angus and assured them she was fine and on board for the show next weekend. She smiled with anticipation. They showed her the board where the three of them were listed in the calendar. “We take turns sleepin here until that cu… sorry lass, that bitch is caught. Ye ken? Jaime’s gonna hire a security guard for next weekend and I’m stayin here to watch over everything.” Claire’s head jerked up, “what?” Claire felt Rupert’s sacrifice and knew his absence would be felt. “Who will I have to bump into Rupert?” He smiled and looked at his shoes. “We’ve got ye lass.” Claire smiled at him, “I know you do and I’m grateful Rupert.” He blushed fiercely at her heartfelt words.

Angus walked up behind them, “party at two o’clock” he said to Rupert. “You guys have a party… in the middle of the day?” Claire could not imagine anything so important that both of them would leave. “Jaime too,” Angus said walking to the arena. Claire could not believe her ears. Jaime did not mention going to a party and no one invited her. Probably nothing.

She poked her head into Jaime’s office before going back to the house. “I’ll be here and ready with Jag at two-thirty.” She searched his eyes and saw nothing. He kissed her and crushed her to him. “See ya then Sassenach.” Jaime went back to his chair and bent over his ledgers. Claire decided he must not be going to this party she wasn’t invited to. Her feelings were a little hurt from being left out but she pushed on calling for Pup.

Claire’s body and mind were exhausted. She laid down on Jaime’s bed and pushed her nose into his pillow breathing in his smell. Fatigue pulled at her and she surrendered to it. In what seemed like just one minute she heard and felt her phone vibrating to pull her back to consciousness. It took great effort to open her eyes and she felt the deep fatigue when she swung her legs to the floor. She considered an early dinner of comfort food, like a southern recipe, designed to knock everyone unconscious within thirty minutes of eating the meal. She smiled at that thought. Only three rides to go before the show. She dragged her body back to the barn.

Claire walked down the main aisle and felt weird energy. She waved to people she knew and decided they all seemed odd. What the hell is wrong with everyone? She wondered. She carried her brush bucket into Jags stall and was assaulted by his nose sniffing for treats. She wondered if the guys were at a party she wasn’t invited to. She pulled out a curry comb and told Jag to mind his manners.

“Ah, Claire?” She was bent over picking a rear hoof and looked behind her. “What’s up Rupert?” She lowered the leg at the weird sound of his voice. “Jaime asked me to give this to ye.” Claire looked at his cheeks blushing like a rose. He feels guilty for not taking me to the party, she thought. Claire opened the large envelope and pulled out a single piece of paper. She scanned it quickly and asked Rupert what she should do with this. He was nearly coming apart with excitement when he pointed to the registered name of a horse. His smile was huge. Claire read the name, “The Sassenach’s Jag, Rupert what is this?” He pointed at the owner’s line. ‘Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp’. Her eyes jerked up at Rupert who was now bouncing on his toes with delight. Claire pointed at Jag, “he’s…” Rupert nodded his head. Claire was feeling dizzy and her heart was ramming in her chest.
With wide eyes she read the document title, ‘Transfer of ownership’ and saw his new registered name, ‘The Sassenach’s Jag’.

When Claire’s brain finally allowed her to accept what was right in front of her, she screamed at Rupert, “he gave me Jag!” Claire threw her arms around Rupert and hugged him tight, then she bounded out of the stall and saw Jaime. He was smiling. Claire leaped into his arms and squeezed his neck. “You gave me Jag!” said through tears of incredulous joy that were streaming down her face.

Claire became aware of all the people standing around them. She looked at each one of them, “you all knew about this?” All heads were nodding. “Oh! Best surprise ever!” She blushed looking at the people who came for her ‘party’. “I love you guys. And I suppose it’s no secret that I love this man.” The girls giggled. Two members of the Pony club walked toward her. They dropped something metal in her hand and said congratulations. Claire held a beautiful shiny brass saddle tag “The Sassenach’s Jag.” Claire hugged them both with renewed happy tears. She turned around and Angus put another one in her hand, “from me and the big dummy.” Rupert’s smile fell off and he glowered at his friend. It was a halter tag, “The Sassenach’s Jag.” Her arms flew around both their necks and she kissed them on the cheek.

Jag was kicking his bars after watching all the excitement. Everybody laughed at his curious expression. Claire held his head and kissed him scratching his face. When she looked up Jaime was dropping the new nameplate into the holder on the front of the stall. ‘The Sassenach’s Jag, Owner: Claire Beauchamp.’ She put her arms around his waist and her head next to his heart. “I don’t have the words I need. They are all too small.” She smiled up at him and her eyes sparkled like diamonds.
Chapter 22

The team had settled into a cautious stand-by mode as Wednesday’s sun broke across the Goldfields. Jaime was in the arena with Donus and Claire watched him from the bedroom window. They both suffered from exhaustion for the last three days and gave themselves over to sleep every night. She missed their intimacy.

“It’s Wednesday” she sighed, and our leader is back on his routine, so that means we are too Pup. She looked down at his adoring face and wagging tail. “Are you ready to go home for a while? I’m sure the doves miss chasing you. Ready?” Pup had no idea what she said but he was happy and ready for it. As they walked up the hill to her house Claire looked out at the beautiful desert that surrounded them and it took her breath away.

It was already 90 degrees so Claire started with the outside chores and Pup ran straight into the far corner of the yard bringing two angry doves swooping down with his butt as their target. Claire was on her knees pulling weeds from the border beds, cutting back bushes and pounding fertilizer stakes under the trees. Her hair was up in a ponytail and sweat dripped off her face onto the astroturf. She had quite a large pile of clippings and weeds and took armfuls to her dumpster.

The lounge and chairs were scrubbed and the shade umbrella opened and sprayed off. It was hot, especially for an import from Boston. Claire decided that was enough for today. She pulled her top off and dropped her cut-offs and jumped in the pool. “Jesus that’s cold!” Pup was laying in the shade chewing on a toy when his head popped up and he looked around for Claire. He bounded up to the pool looking thrilled to see this new activity. Then he jumped in the water startling his unprepared mistress. Pup’s comfort level seemed the same for land and water. He was out racing around the back yard and then flying into the water again.

He dropped his toy into the water and laid down to watch it float. After watching it bob against the side of the pool, three inches below his nose, he got up and hopped at the toy. Claire swam to him and grabbed the toy making Pup go crazy. Then she threw it to the other end and Pup jumped into the water and brought it back. He jumped out shaking off water and looked from the toy to Claire until she threw it again.

Angus stormed out of the indoor arena dripping with sweat heading for the tack room. “What’s amiss Angus?” Jaime asked. Angus walked back toward Jaime with spurs in his hand. “That number, Christ, I canna remember their numbers. The big warmblood, his head is nothin but sawdust. I canna collect him. Jaime watched the Danish Warmblood refuse leg commands even with spurs and Angus was fed up. Jaime swung up on him and it looked like an electric current had gone through the horse. His head jerked up, and tucked, giving his thick neck a beautiful bow. His body pulled into the ‘I’m ready’ stance. Jaime, wanting to make short work of this pushed him into a canter from a standstill. He pushed him through all of his gates and noticed his extended trot was something to behold. He was beautiful when he was working. At a canter, Jaime signaled the horse to change leads with every stride. Angus shook his in amazement. Jaime jumped down and handed the horse to Angus.

Soaked with sweat and not finding anywhere to cool off, Jaime walked up to Claire’s house intending to jump in her pool before he passed out. Letting himself in he heard her voice and water splashing and he was thrilled she was here.

Claire screamed with shock when Jaime dove over her head into the water. He popped up with Pup’s toy in his mouth and dove back down just before Pup got to him. The cool relief was invigorating and after five minutes of playing with Pup, he swam underwater to grab his sweet girl. Claire screamed when he pulled her off the step and into his arms. Before they surfaced he kissed
her.

With their heads out of the water, Jaime kissed her and ran his hands over her body before pulling her up and wrapping her legs around his waist. “I’m hungry for ye lass,” he panted, “and I’m gonna ravish ye, ken? Since ye have no choice in that matter, ye can choose where ye get ravished.” Claire was laughing when Jaime kissed her quiet. “Start here” she breathed. Jaime lowered her to pull him inside and gasped. He sat on the deepest stair lifting her up and down and hearing her pant and whisper into his ear. He sent her sailing into an orgasm and held her tight until she moved again. He picked her up and carried her to the lounge. When her back hit the fabric she rolled off and nudged Jaime to lay on his back. She put her lips around him and Jaime moaned with the exquisite feeling. He watched her mouth on him and was ready to explode so he pulled her up to straddle him and growled when he filled her. She was really getting good at this he thought as he floated on the waves of his orgasm.

Claire laid in Jaime's arms and decided the life they have is pretty amazing. She wasn’t feeling the need to leave anymore because Laoghaire would be arrested the first time she goes home. That had to be any minute now she thought.

Claire walked into Jag’s stall at two o’clock to get him ready. She noticed the nameplate was no longer on the front of the stall and she wondered why. When she had brushed a shine into Jag’s coat she looked at her watch. “We are early so let’s say hi to Fred and Ginger.” She snapped a lead and they went to visit Claire’s favorite couple. Pup was decidedly unhappy sharing Jag with the other horses and he was humping to move Jag along when a loud bark came out. Pup’s tail tucked and he ran away whimpering.

Once they were on cross country course and Jag was warmed up, Jaime waved her in.“This will be yer lasts cross country until Sunday. We have’na seen the course ye’ll ride so a couple of cautions. Ye’ll have to slow him at times for safety and collection before hard jumps. Use the bit sparingly, always light, and rely more on yer seat to slow him or shorten his stride. Put a hard leg comin out of the water so he is extended, as you come to the last group slow him and collect him with yer seat deep in the saddle. It’s just practice so ye have a good way to slow him down if ye need to. Give me five minutes to get there.” He winked at her and jumped in his truck.

Jamie saw the dust before Claire and Jag were in view. He marveled at the way they moved together and pulled his phone up to record the last cluster of jumps. Jag responded well to Claire changing her seat to slow him down. His dressage training kept him sensitive to her seat position and he responded perfectly. He smiled at the plume of dust in their wake. “Wish everybody listened to me like that.”

When they got back to the barn, Claire saw Rupert and Angus teasing Jaime about something. He was not happy about it whatever it was.

Claire prepared a thick piece of Salmon with capers and butter and a large salad for dinner. When Jaime closed the front door he could see the plumes of smoke from the grill and stuck his head out the back door. Claire was humming to her earbuds and shaking her ass which pulled Jaime into a hypnotic trance. He watched her legs flex and her rear end sway to unheard music. Prepared to catch hot meat flying through the air, he wrapped his arm around her waist and turned her around to his mouth. It was a good start to the evening.

During dinner, Claire asked him about the ribbing she saw when they came back today. “Just givin me a hard time about sleepin in the barn tonight. It’s my turn,” he said miserably. Claire’s eyes went wide, “you mean I can’t sleep with you tonight?” Jaime was still eating with gusto “aye.” She knew it had to be done but she didn’t have to like it.

Later that evening, Jaime kissed her goodnight and vacated the bed they shared. Claire felt lonely
and anxious. She stood at the window and watched the barn hoping to see him. When the barn was dark she got into bed.

Claire’s eyes popped open at one in the morning. She tossed and turned for twenty minutes before she gave up. Wrapped up in Jaime’s terry robe and a blanket under her arm she opened the door an inch to listen for coyotes then slipped out into the night. Pup bounced alongside her and Claire was grateful for the company. At the halfway point she decided this was foolish and considered turning back until she heard the howling of coyotes on the chase. She ran toward the barn as fast as she could and stopped to breathe once inside the main aisle. She could still hear the howling and a chill ran down her spine.

She looked in Jaime’s office but it was empty. She slowly walked the aisle looking for him. When she turned into a side aisle she heard someone whisper “stop.” Her eyes flew open and she was statue still when she felt a presence behind her. With a racing heart, she recalled Laoghaire’s threat to send other men to hurt her. She whirled toward the whisper and was silenced with her lovers kiss. It was deep and promising and Claire melted into him. “I couldn’t sleep alone Jaime,” she said breathlessly between kisses. “I want to sleep here with you.” Jaime walked her to the empty stall he was using and she laid down in soft spongy wood shavings with Jaime cuddling from behind. She sighed deeply and floated into sleep. Pup laid down with his back against Jaime’s back and the three of them passed the night together without incident.

Claire heard a soft deep voice ask an important question and all she wanted to say is I love you. The voice was persistent and she opened her eyes to Jaime lying alongside her. “Mo chridhe, I thought ye might want to get up before the boarders start comin in. She pulled him to her and he covered her with his body. “My angel” he whispered. Claire felt his erection and pushed her legs open kissing his neck. “Jaime, I know you want me, I can feel it.” She wiggled under him until he was an inch from her opening. “Get out of your head and love me like you want to Jaime. Please, I want to feel… ooof!” It wasn’t slow, or gentle. The first thrust ignited a bonfire in his loins and he took her with all the lust and power he felt. He finished with a loud growl in her ear and pressed himself deep inside her. “Jesus H Roosevelt Christ!” she whispered.

They all walked back to the house and Claire made breakfast while Jaime showered. She was replaying the barn sex on a continuous loop in her head. It was different, he was different, and she wanted to know how to get him like that in the future. It was a very hot encounter. She was locked into her fantasy while the sausage burned. “Sassenach? Ye all right?” Claire’s eyes jerked up to Jaime, “no! I mean yes, shit the sausage is burning!” Jaime eyed her suspiciously, what is goin through ye head lass? She turned her startled smile to him, “well, have a great day. See you this afternoon. Love you!” Claire walked swiftly to the front door and Jaime looked at the food still in the pans. He grabbed a fork and ate the scrambled eggs watching the door. Claire came shooting in, breathing heavy. “I forgot my purse…and my clothes on…they should be on…and Pup.” Three minutes later she was gone and Pup was trotting behind her. Jaime finished the food and cleaned up before returning to work.

Claire came through her front door like a bullet. “Jesus Christ, what is wrong with me?” She sat on the couch feeling like an out-of-control idiot. I will be the picture of calm sophistication when I see him this afternoon and pretend like nothing weird happened this morning. She felt better and got up to assemble her three show outfits, two pairs of boots, chaps, gloves, pin, and something sexy for my love, she thought. She pulled her sexiest bra and panties out of the drawer and the barn-sex loop played in her head again. God that was hot, but I have no idea why she thought. She decided to Google it.

An hour later she leaned back on the couch with her laptop on her knees. Her hands were shaking and she was flushed. For some reason, she kept holding her breath so she was breathing in puffs. She
looked at the screen, and then at her thighs, and her very short cutoffs. She wanted to call Jaime before she exploded. She played with the fringe on shorts and felt herself throb with engorgement. Her finger touched warm skin and pressed the fold to touch what was screaming at her. In thirty seconds she had an orgasm and in her shock, the laptop fell to the wood floor and broke the screen.

Claire jumped to her feet, “Jesus Christ! That wasn’t, I didn’t mean to, it’s broken now, oh holy shit!” She unplugged the laptop and felt a blanket of dread wrap itself around her. She tried to snap out of her mood and dress for riding but it felt like she was walking through quicksand. A brainiac surgeon who still tripped over little bombs left in her mind by a narcissistic fiance. She heard Frank’s voice in her head. “It’s a mortal sin to touch yourself so never start Claire. I won’t be seen around town with a dirty skank that masturbates.” Shut up Frank, it was only once and I am not a dirty skank, she thought. “C’mon Pup.” The cheery Pup bounded out the door but picked up on Claire’s mood as they walked. When they reached the barn his head was low and he watched the ground with an utter lack of excitement.

Claire stopped at Fred’s stall and put her head on his back wanting to cry. Jaime watched her for two minutes before walking up to the stall to say hello. Claire looked up and smiled. He ducked into the stall and gave her a hug that her heart was not a part of. “What’s happened Sassenach to take the sparkle from ye eyes? Christ even Pup looks sad, and since when does the laddie lay down in Fred’s stall?” Claire forced herself to perk up and told Jaime about breaking her laptop. “So I guess I’m just bummmed about that. I have a date with Jag, see you after.” Pup looked up at Jaime with an expression that said ‘I’m so sad, but I have no idea why.’

Jaime tried to work but he couldn’t concentrate. He would bet his life on her honesty, and when her face told him there was a problem she would tell him when he asked her. By Christ, I think she just lied to me, he thought. And what could be so terrible to make her do that? He watched her from the barn and could see Angus was frustrated and Claire looked miserable. His cell phone rang and Lance asked if Claire was alright. She missed training with him today. Claire jumped down and put up her stirrups, then she dropped her forehead on the saddle and Jaime almost lost it. Angus walked by him and shook his head. “The lass canna get Jag to canter. I think she might be sick er somethin.” Or somethin, he thought. He went back to work and waited for her to come by as she always did before going home. She didn’t come today and Jaime watched them walk up the road like they were both going to the gallows.

Jaime’s biggest thrill of the day is walking through the front door after work. He and the Sassenach would have all evening to eat, talk, rest, or make love. Tonight the very house felt like it was miserable. This couldn’t wait. He found Claire in the study reading. She looked up and smiled. “Come here mo chridhe.” He held her to him as he searched his heart and mind for how to ask about the issue. He took her hand and led her to the couch. They sat face to face and Jaime pulled her chin up to see her eyes.

“Can I ask ye about yer day lass?” She nodded. Jaime noticed her face had gone from troubled…to shame! His heart doubled its rate and he was frozen with a war going on his head. Why would she feel shame? Unless…Jaime took a deep breath and bet everything on Claire. “Somethin happened to ye today and it is more than you can handle. I see that and what it has cost ye. Precious time with Angus before yer show, ye missed training with Lance, and ye lied to me makin me heartsick. None of that is Claire Beauchamp. So I’ll ask ye again lass, what’s amiss?” Claire was reeling at his honesty and her guilt doubled. Every word he said ended in skank, in her mind. “Like I told you I broke my laptop today.” He could barely hear her when she was twelve inches away. “How did that happen?” He pulled her chin up again and she saw love in his amazing blue eyes.

Claire cleared her throat and explained that the laptop fell off her knees and hit the wood floor. Jaime
chuckled, “that happened to me once. The damn thing jumped off my legs when I was sittin on this very sofa with my feet up on that coffee table.” She smiled at his joke and admitted to herself that Jaime would not let her slink away with her secret. “When ye left this mornin ye were out of sorts, can ye tell me why?” He saw her acquiesce and hoped he would hear every terrible detail. “I really liked the sex in the barn this morning and kept seeing you in my head while I made breakfast. I got rattled I guess because it was so hot. Then I wondered how I could make that happen again because I really liked it. That’s when my laptop broke.” This scenario did not even cross his mind and relief flooded through him. She was alone when the terrible thing happened… thank God. “I am completely at a loss Sassenach. I can’t even guess what happened to make yer laptop fall off yer knees and break.” He knew he was close so he couldn’t stop.

Jaime pulled her on his lap, under his chin so she could confess her crime without him watching her. “I know somethin happened when ye were sitting on the couch right before yer laptop fell off yer knees. Knowing a bit about how yer mind works I would bet it was a how-to video about…” he paused considering the options, sex in a barn, sex on wood shavings, rough sex. “Mo chridhe, were ye watchin a video about rough sex, or somethin like that?” She exhaled a long breath and nodded her head. “How to turn him into a beast. I watched five or six of them but none of them fit.” She took another deep breath and almost whispered “I didn’t mean to do it.” Jaime was scrambling to figure out what exactly “it” was. “Give me a second lass. Please don’t get up. I like holdin ye like this.” Jaime put his head back and closed his eyes. He conjured an image of Claire on her sofa watching what amounted to porn with a purpose. Christ, after five or six sex video’s people are poundin each other to glory or jackin-off.

Jaime’s head whipped up. He spoke quietly, “did ye touch yerself Sassenach?” He felt her nod her head yes. “Did ye make yerself come sweetheart?” A pause, and a nod. “Is that what made the laptop fall?” She found her voice suddenly. “I didn’t mean to do it and it doesn’t change who I am just doing it once.” Jaime was getting confused again, “yer talkin about yer laptop now right lass?” He felt her head shake no and he had a very hard time wrapping his head around all of this. “Sassenach, darlin, yer a doctor and yer talkin crazy.” That hurt. “My medical curriculum and rotations had nothing to with that if that’s what you mean. I doubt there were two lines on the subject in all my med books combined.” He touched her cheek, just one more question love, “what happens to women who masturbate often?” He couldn’t miss the deep blush on her cheeks when he said masturbate. “They’re skanks, dirty skanks.” Somewhere deep down he knew his next question might very well change his belief in human decency. “Did Frank tell you that?” She looked up, “yes.”

Jaime took both of her hands in his and looked straight into her eyes. “I’m proud of ye lass and I love ye the same as I did before ye told me. I am goin outside to walk to the end of my property and back. And then I’m gonna tell ye the truth of it.” She watched him slip out the back door. She poured a whiskey, and then another. She pulled another glass and filled it for Jaime.

Jaime stood at the edge of the grass and barely saw the outlines of the cactus rising twenty feet or more all around him. He was used to her quirks, like weird behavior when she was aroused. Mostly, he thought they were adorable. This is something entirely different. She was only two years from the jungle when he found her. A veritable babe in the woods. And ye tortured her with excessive control, complete lack of affection and ye demoralized her with sex. Ye took everything from her you fuck. Her friends, her horses, even the rights to her own body. Installing that bit of bullshit had one goal for you Frank. Ye get off on torture. It has been a fantasy to meet ye one day and pound some reality into ye. Now its a plan. Be expecting me.

Jaime tried his best to shake off the murderous energy he felt. How could he explain to Claire that masturbation was as natural as eating? He doubted she would believe him. But he knew someone she would believe. Claire was in the same position as when he left. His heart hurt for her. He swiped the whiskey in one gulp. Poured another and finished it.
The whiskey was warm and calming. He was starting to relax his tight muscles and twisted mind. “How can I undo four years of Frank’s lyin to ye?” He lifted his cell phone, “my sister! It’s almost time for her to get up so she won’t mind.” He pushed her name and switched the phone to speaker. It rang three times and went to voicemail. He called again and she answered on the second ring. “What in God’s name has ye callin me at three o’clock in the mornin? Are ye hurt brother?” He went straight to the point, “Jenny, how often do ye masturbate?” Claire looked up at him astonished. “Maybe five or six times a month. If Ians away, well, I’d need a calculator to figure that one out.” Jaime pressed, “can ye call some friends and ask them and call me back?” She snickered, “writin a science paper are ye? Katie, my best friend, she got a dildo that runs on batteries. It was a birthday present from her husband. She was developin Carpal Tunnel from rubbin it so much.” Jenny was laughing throughout the questions. Jaime felt immense gratitude she had handled the call so well. “I love ye Jenny. I have yer bathroom well stocked and someone important for ye to meet. Please come soon.” She clicked off.

Claire’s face had brightened considerably. There was no denying that call was unplanned and spontaneous. Jaime felt the first wave of relief and tremendous hunger. “What might be yer favorite kind of water right now love? What can we eat?” She considered the question. “A Big bubble bath down here and pizza from Nello’s. Jaime’s eyes lit up and he ran to the bathroom pulling caps and smelling each aroma. He turned the water on and poured half a bottle into the running water. The bathroom filled with amazing aroma. Claire brought in two slices each of pizza but Jaime ran by her before she could hand it over. When he came back he put two candles on the tub and Claire handed him the pizza. She eyed the column of bubbles rising up out of the tub. “How much of that bubble bath did you put in there?” Jaime’s mouth was too full so he shrugged his shoulders.

It took ten minutes to pull armfuls of bubbles to the sink and wash them down. Jaime declared it perfect and eased in. Claire stepped in and eased down into the voluminous bubbles. She felt Jaime’s arm pull her to him and she rested against his chest enjoying the emotional saxophone playing in the living room. When Jaime swallowed Claire’s second piece of pizza, he picked up a bar of soap and announced they would wash the bastard Frank off of her forever. Claire laughed when he rolled the soap in his hands and covered her body with one section at a time.

Claire enjoyed the lavish attention and the music but put her hands up in a time out. Wrapping a towel around her she fetched two glasses and the bottle of whiskey. She sat down in the aromatic bubbles again and offered Jaime her other arm.

They were floating on whiskey, pizza, and the saxophone when Claire pulled the plug. Jaime’s eyes flew open, “not yet” he pleaded. She pushed the plug back in. “I don’t want to splash water on the floor.” She straddled him and pulled him inside her body where Jaime was surrounded in her softness, her wet arousal, and her clenching muscles that milked him as he released.

When he held her in bed, in the dark, she asked. “What made sex so different this morning?” With her head on his chest she heard him chuckle at the question. “Well, my girlfriend was under me with her legs open, kissin my neck and rubbin on me. My head was screamin to get ye out of there before someone walked in and saw us. Ye made me weak lass. The possibility of getting caught by borders or the guys was like a tonic, ye ken?” Claire snuggled closer, Hmm, thank you for the answer. Jaime was very curious about why she liked it so much and asked her to explain. “You are sexy and caring in bed, always. You hold back and usually finish when I’m in the throws of orgasm. I never see much of what you look like when you finish. This morning I saw something raw, purely sexual, and hungry. It was so erotic and I want to see that part of you again someday. Jaime was taking mental notes at a fever pace. Something opened the communication channels tonight and he was listening intently. “I think ye’ll be seein that side of me again someday,” he laughed. Ye canna force the neanderthal lass. But I love the fact ye wanted to try. Yer a rare woman Claire Beauchamp.”
Jaime’s last kiss was full of love, gratitude, and the promise of rest before things really got weird.
Chapter 23

Laoghaire paced in the tiny, filthy apartment where she was hiding. Her anger and hatred for Claire grew daily until it was barely containable. The tenant was fed up with her ranting nonsense and wanted her out. She had secured her stay with seduction but he didn’t even want that anymore. She convinced him to do a perfectly legal errand for her and she would leave. It was almost time.

Claire woke up to an empty bed and ran to the window. Jaime was just walking Donus back to the barn. She considered all there was to do today and pushed away from the window. They had new greenies coming today, two today and two next week. She had to polish her tack and boots, school Jag, a soapy bath and braid his tail. Jaime asked her to ride the Danish Warmblood today because the owner decided to sell him and this show was a good place to do that. She was dressed and called for Pup at the door.

She saw Jaime was alone and bounced in for a kiss and hug. “Are ye excited Sassenach?” Her smile was his answer. “I’m cleaning tack and riding Jag with Angus so just let me know when to ride the warmblood. She kissed him again and let her tongue invade his mouth. He sucked air and pulled her to him. “Sassenach” he whispered. “I love you,” she whispered. Then she was out the door to tackle her list.

Mid-morning she finished her ride with Jag and gave him a bath, did his nails and shaved his chin and legs. She crouched behind him and cut his glorious tail straight across about six inches from the ground. “Don’t you look fancy.” She retrieved an apple and pulled a chunk off for Pup. She led Jag back to his stall and worked on combing out his tail, grateful for a cross breeze that kept them cool. Claire looked up when a man she had never seen asked if she was Claire Beauchamp. He handed her a manila envelope and said: “you’ve been served.” Claire looked incredulous but the man was already gone. She opened the envelope and pulled out a single blank piece of paper. “What the hell?”

“That is exactly where you’re going Sassenach bitch!” Claire turned around to see Laoghaire coming in the half door. She walked up to Claire and with her face an inch away she explained exactly what she would do to Jaime once Claire was out of the picture. Claire was about to launch into her own verbal assault when Laoghaire produced a switchblade and released it. “I’m gonna cut your throat you cunt and you’ll bleed out before any help comes. Jag’s stall was at the end of the row and Claire knew it was unlikely for someone to walk by. “Laoghaire wait, please” Claire was talking as loud as she dared. “You will spend the rest of your life in prison if you kill me. Do you want that?”

Laoghaire laughed, “Jaime will post my bail and get me out. I am his girlfriend and rider, not you!” Laoghaire was losing it. Her hands shook and her eyes were round with rage. She looked at Jag. “Is this your precious horse? You can watch him die first.” She drew her arm back to stab Jag in the chest. Claire was screaming at her to stop when a blur came out of nowhere and hit Laoghaire on the side of her head. Laoghaire went crashing into the corner. “ye alright Sassenach?” Jaime grabbed Laoghaire by the hair and dragged her up not expecting her to sink a six-inch blade into his arm. Claire screamed for help watching blood gush from the wound. Jaime drove Laoghaire’s head into the wall and pulled the knife from her hand. He blew the emergency whistle over and over until Angus and Rupert were panting in the stall. “Tie this psycho to somethin sturdy while I arrange for her ride.” Laoghaire lunged for Rupert and he punched her in the face. She was knocked out cold.

Claire got Jaime to his office and looked at the wound. She ran to her footlocker and brought back towels that she pressed onto the wound using another to tie it to his arm. She worried about the blood he was losing and nudged him to the door. “You need the emergency room Jaime.” He put his hand on her, “just a minute lass.” He pulled out his wallet and asked her to pull the officer’s card out. She
took his cell phone and dialed the number clicking the speaker on. He was not on duty so they called his cell phone written on the back of the card. “I’m on my way but call 911, tell them attempted murder, perp is subdued, and there are injuries. We want to do this by the book.”

Claire looked at the cloth on Jaime’s arm, now soaked in blood. “Jaime you’re losing a lot of blood we can’t wait any longer.” Angus appeared at the door and was told the police were on the way. Did ye tie her to somethin?” Angus smiled, “Rupert knocked her out when she tried to bite him in the neck. Ye don’t look so good Jaime boy.” Claire looked up and saw Jaime’s face had gone white as a sheet. “Jesus Christ!” She dialed 911 again and got Jaime to his chair. She heard sirens coming and breathed a sigh of relief.

Claire looked at the blood dripping from the cloth on Jaime’s arm and prayed for the ambulance to hurry. Three squad cars tore into the center, officers unclipped their guns and made their way down the main aisle looking in every direction. Angus signaled them from Jag’s stall. Another siren tore into the driveway and three EMT’s with their gear walked into the barn looking for direction. Claire whistled and waved them toward her. The EMT’s took over and Jaime was strapped to a gurney. They pushed a line into him because his blood pressure was dangerously low. Claire was sobbing when they wheeled him quickly toward their vehicle.

Claire had to make a statement to the officers before she could go to the hospital to be with Jaime. She saw Laoghaire’s face and the knife in her mind and started to shake. “Not now Beauchamp, you can fall apart later.” She walked out of the office and almost ran into the officer they called. She smiled and pumped his hand with relief. He was going to help her with her statement so she could leave.

Laoghaire was on her feet but swaying. Her face was swelling with a large bruise on both sides, dried blood was caked in her nose, and her hair was tangled with dried blood. Claire explained what happened and how she stabbed Jaime. The officers asked a lot of questions about Laoghaire’s distance from her, from Jag, how she held the knife and what her body movements were attempting to stab Jag. When she could finally leave she looked to Rupert. He nodded that he would finish up here. Claire ran down the aisle looking for Pup but he was nowhere to be found. She ran to the house to get her truck and looked in the barn again but could not find him. She told Rupert to look for him and she left.

Pup was shaking hard and he pressed closer into the corner of the tack room, nose to the wall, statue still. He was terrified by what he saw and felt from his humans.

Claire found Jaime being stitched up in an examining room in the ER. The doctor sat on a high stool next to the bed and bent over his work. Jaime looked up and smiled at her looking much better. A nurse came in and handed him a fresh container of juice. Claire pushed a curl from his forehead. “How do you feel love?” Before he could speak the doctor looked over his bifocals at Claire. “Is this the doctor?” Jaime smiled at her “aye.” The doctor bent over Jaime’s arm again. “His crit is borderline, shouldn’t take too long to build it up again. Keep the wound dry and the arm braced until the stitches come out. Ten days, you can do it. I heard all about the trip to Palm Springs. Normally I would say no travel for three days but if he feels good it should be safe enough.

Jaime’s arm was bandaged and put into a sling with prescriptions for pain and antibiotics. They were quiet on the way back. Both processing the terrifying events leading up to this ride. “This is the second time you have saved my life.” Jaime took a deep breath, “tell me what happened lass. How did she find ye, and what were her intentions?” Claire told Jaime about the phony process server and Laoghaire slipping in through the half door. “She wanted to kill Jag in front of me. Before she slit my throat. You don’t have to worry about me, I won’t fall to pieces. “Actually, by the time she gets out, you won’t even be cute anymore and I am grateful for that.” Jaime slid over to crowd her and put his
mouth to her ear. “So ye think I’m cute Sassenach?” Claire laughed and tried hard to stay in her lane.

Jaime refused to rest and called a meeting in his office. They ran down what was left to do before they rolled out later in the afternoon. Claire begged Jaime to put the show off for a month but he needed the commission on the warmblood and stuck to the plan. Before they disbanded Rupert asked to speak. “Ye say we’re a team all the time, you and us, are the team. If that’s true then you need to rely on us to finish getting everything ready. Claire and Angus will decide if she can show the warmblood and I’ve made the decision to go with ye and keep the security guard for the weekend.” Jaime looked at Rupert’s red cheeks bunched up in a smile. “Yer right Rupert, I don’t need to be here this afternoon. I’m goin home to rest my throbbin arm. One thing I need from ye, call when ye make a decision about the warmblood. They agreed and Claire was overjoyed he agreed to rest. She gave Rupert a look of appreciation.

Claire got the horse ready, zipped and clipped her chaps and stuck her spurs on. Rupert and Angus waited in the outdoor arena and Angus voiced his doubts she would be able to ride the horse. “Well, why didn’ye say that in front of Jaime ye chickenshit?” Angus nodded, “here she comes.” Warmbloods are huge horses and Claire looked at Angus for a leg up. They watched her fidget with her stirrups, and pull her gloves on, it took her a minute to adjust the reins. “Lass!” shouted Angus. “Ok, ok, I’m ready” She gave a squeeze and the beast moved forward. The first time he ignored her leg she gave him a sharp wakeup call with her spurs and was able to run him through the gates after that. “Angus watched with his mouth open, I’ll be damned.” The horse completed all movements required for his dressage test and Claire was happy. She looked at how far the ground was and asked Rupert to catch her. He refused so she clung to the saddle and eased herself down. “God he’s a big horse, so much power once he’s collected. He should do great.”

Claire handed the reins to Angus and walked toward the barn. She felt like she had forgotten something and ran down the list in her head. When she felt the cool shade inside the barn she stopped in her tracks. “Pup.” She looked everywhere he might be, becoming more frantic by the minute. She walked into the tack room and there was pup sitting up into the corner with his nose pressed into the wall. “Oh my God, Pup. Jesus Christ, I’m so sorry you’ve been alone all this time.” She sat next to him but he wouldn’t look at her. Claire’s heart broke. She stroked him and cried, telling him he was so loved and she was so sorry. When Pup didn’t move she laid down right next to him on the cement floor. She kept her hands on him and told him a puppy story. It took twenty minutes for her to feel his nose pushing into her arm, sniffing. He smelled her chest, hair, ear, and then he laid down in front of her. She kept stroking him and sniffing from her tears.

Claire got to her feet very stiff from the cold floor. She walked out calling Pup and held her breath. He followed and she felt a huge relief. She led him home and kept him close while she walked all her stuff to the door for easy loading. She walked upstairs to find Jaime sound asleep. He looked so peaceful and heartbreakingly handsome. She sat next to him on the bed. It was time to wake him up. Claire kissed Jaime on the cheek, under his jaw, down his neck, and then looked at him suspiciously. “Your not asleep you faker.” Jaime was laughing and promising he was indeed asleep so she needed to give him more kisses. Claire released the top button of his shirt and kissed him there, then the next button and a kiss. Each button she would look at his face and see his eyes were still closed. The next button was released and a kiss with her tasting his skin. The next three kisses were soft and wet making Claire squirm with building heat.

Yer startin somethin that’ll cost us time lass. We need light to walk the course when we get there. She delivered the coup de gras, “I’ll ride it blind if I can have you now” she whispered and kissed him deeply as her tongue played with his. She was in control and Jaime was more than happy to let her ravish him. “Yer a wee seductress mo chridhe” was said into her ear sometime later. Claire took a deep breath and stretched. “Well, if you insist on going to the show we should get on the road I
suppose.”

Thirty minutes later they were heading for California. Claire insisted they take her truck and trailer so she could see Jag with the internal video feed. Jaime handed Claire his phone and asked her to call the officer that had helped them. Claire pushed a button on the steering wheel and said the number aloud. “Just talk into the steering wheel.” Jaime laughed, “it’s time for me to get a new truck.”
The ride to California was uneventful. Very little traffic, the horses were quiet, and Claire was on her email a lot going back and forth with a prospect for the equine therapy position. Claire was basically offering the use of her horses and not much more. The manager had to have a decent business plan including monetizing the therapy. Claire was getting excited about this girl, Sarah Barker. If something didn’t happen soon she would sell Fred and Ginger back to the institute and ship them home.

She filled Jaime in on Sarah’s background. “she’s a psychologist specializing in trauma. She’s on staff at St. Luke Children’s hospital and she has a private practice. No shortage of kids who need the therapy. She was raised on a ranch, still rides when she can. She’s perfect. I hope this works.”

Pup had opted to sleep on Claire’s lap for the last three hours and she was stiff. “C’mon Pup, let’s open the window so you can interact with the elements.” Pup was reluctant to sit in his own space until the window went down. He tried to ignore the air coming into the cab full of crazy new things to smell. He sat up and stuck his nose close to the window. Claire leaned against Jaime and stuck her bare feet out the window. In five minutes, Pup had his head out the window looking like the happiest dog who ever lived. Claire laughed at him and took some pictures of his funny face.

Jaime asked Claire to speak to the steering wheel and get Angus for him. “Jaime boy, where are ye?” Jaime looked for a mile marker, “twenty miles outside of Palm Springs. Where are you?” Angus laughed, we’re here at the show. I’m standin in line to register and Rupert is checking on the stalls. Take exit 450, it’ll be comin up soon for ye, go East and follow to the showgrounds. It’s a shortcut.” Jaime smiled, “good lads, be right there.”

When they rolled in Rupert and Angus were walking toward them. Jaime, Claire, and Pup got out. Jaime asked Angus if he minded driving Claire’s truck and unloading the horses. Angus laughed, “I’ve driven it before.” He looked at Claire and she blushed with the painful memory. “We need to walk the course and have maybe thirty minutes of light left.” Angus hopped in and drove toward the barn.

Jaime held Claire’s hand as they walked into the wooded cross country course. He told her to find the jumps with a white and red flag on either end. She found most of them and made a mental note of the ones she missed. “Many of the jumps are constructed to completely collapse if a horse bumps them, like this one here.” When they rounded a bend Claire saw the first water jumps and felt her heartbeat quicken.

“That is quite a drop into the water.” Her eyes were wide with fear. Jaime walked to the water’s edge and stuck a stick in.” It’s only eight or nine inches deep. Easy!” he smiled at her. They kept walking and Jaime quickened their pace due to failing light. There was a second water feature and Claire’s heart nearly stopped. She scanned the jumps for white and red flags and swallowed hard. “I can’t do that” she whispered. There were strange geometric shapes in the water with impossible jump angles. Jaime told her to jump any part of the object that was between the flags was legal. “Sassenach, look,” using his hand he indicated a nearly straight line across all the objects. “Oh! That’s not so bad.” She said gratefully. Claire was unprepared for the level of difficulty on this course. Jaime looked at her with understanding, “Claire, remember how ye felt on yer hail-Mary ride with Jag?” She closed her eyes, “so much fun!” Jaime smiled, “exactly. Every course should feel that way. The tough jumps are exhilarating so let them be.” He pointed at a nearby jump over a five-foot ditch with water under it. “Can Jag clear that ditch?” She looked at it, “easily.” He took her hand and walked them out of the course. “Remember, you are’na jumping, he is. You depend on Jag to clear the ditch, he depends
on you to moderate his speed so he can.”

Before they were clear of the trees Jaime pushed Claire up against one and kissed her deeply. With his face an inch from hers he touched her cheek, “there is a wee fee for coachin ye know.” Claire was breathing hard, “whatever it is I’ll pay it.” One more kiss and they were walking toward the barn their horses were in.

Rupert was standing in front of Jag’s stall looking around impatiently. “Is everything ready for tomorrow Rupert?” He looked relieved, “ah Jaime, everythin is done and we are very hungry so if ye don’t mind we’ll be headin out for some dinner.” Jaime looked suspiciously at Rupert. “Aye, see ye tomorrow.” Rupert dashed off to join Angus and two local girls. “He was acting odd.” Claire looked up at Jaime, “Christ, we need a chair pronto.” She was pulling him out of the barn and told him to sit and wait for her. Claire ran to the truck, pulled the trailer pin and slammed the lock on it. Then she pulled up and helped Jaime. She was alarmed at his white face and wanted to get him to a bed with some food. “Do we have reservations somewhere?” Jaime spoke the address to the navigator system and they arrived in five minutes. She turned to Jaime expecting a fight. “I am checking us in and you are staying here.” Jaime nodded yes and she panicked even more.

Once inside the hotel, Claire was impressed with the opulence. Sweet Jaime, she thought, this place is awesome. She explained there was a sick man in the truck, “what is the fastest way to our room?” The hotel staff explained where to park and they were waiting there so she could load Jaime into a service elevator which was right next to their room. The bellboy asked Jaime if he broke his arm.

“No, I was stabbed savin this one from a homicidal maniac this morning.” Claire assessed the signs of low blood pressure and prayed he didn’t faint before getting to the bed.

She got Jaime to their bed and gently wiped the sweat from his face with a cold towel. She wanted to apologize for being so selfish and letting him walk four miles in the woods. She ordered three glasses of juice, roast beef, potatoes, gravy, and rolls. She ran down to the truck and pulled her suitcase and Pup and used the service elevator again. The food arrived in ten minutes and Claire tipped the server. Jaime was ravenous and consumed everything put in front of him. He laid back on the mountain of pillows Claire built behind him. “Better!” he declared. Claire took his pulse and exhaled in relief. It was back to normal. She turned the light off on his side of the bed. She ran her fingers through his hair, lightly scratching his scalp to ease him into sleep. She heard him whisper, “I love ye Claire.” Her heart was bursting with love for him. “I love you too.”

Claire took Pup out for a walk, showered, and watched a movie. When she turned off the light she snuggled up to Jaime who was still in his clothes. She felt him stir and get up. He slid into bed behind her so he could spoon her. She sighed into his naked body and floated to sleep.

Show day. The morning started at dawn with a long walk with Pup. They walked through a large field where she could release him to run. She threw his favorite ball until her arm hurt and they headed back.

Claire ordered everything on the breakfast menu, omelet, pancakes, sausage, bacon, chicken-fried steak, hash browns, and three glasses of juice. Jaime looked at this beautiful girl in her white breeches polishing her boots. Her hair was pulled back tightly in a bun and she glowed with vitality. He had seen every side of her and lingered, in his mind, on her naked body surrendering to him. “Jesus!” He shook his head. Claire looked alarmed and came running. “What is it?” She put her foot down this morning about Jaime coming to the show grounds early. He was pale again with dark circles under his eyes. He didn’t fight her about it. “Nothin is wrong mo chridhe, ye just take my breath away sometimes.” Claire blushed like a rose and leaned in to kiss him.

A server arrived with the food and Claire wheeled the little table next to the bed. She tipped the man
and then kissed Jaime one more time before applying the red lipstick that made him weak in the knees. Rupert was calling, he was waiting for her in the parking lot. Claire buttoned her black jacket, picked up her extra clothes, and stuck her black velvet helmet and crop under the other arm. “I will call you after the warmblood’s test. He will be great. A half-hour in the schooling pen with my long spurs and I will be the center of his universe.” She smiled down at the center of her universe. “I fear for the giant laddie.” Claire laughed and headed for the door. “Thank ye Sassenach.” She looked back at him, “anything for you love.”

Rupert looked a bit hung over and didn’t say much on the ride to the showgrounds. When Claire’s boot hit the ground she was infused with the energy and excitement of show day. It was very crowded and she lost track of Rupert working her way to the barn. She looked at her notes and counted the stalls to where Jag was. She looked in the stall excited to see him but found a girl standing on a mounting block plaiting a mane. She looked around the girl and it was Jag. “Hello,” she said looking up at a pretty young girl. Her smile was beaming, “hope you don’t mind, I’m Kayla, and me and my friend are grooms here. We went out with Angus and Rupert last night and we’re happy to help.” Claire looked at her perfect plaiting and was overwhelmed with the help. “Your plaits are beautiful. Thank you so much for the help Kayla.” The girl blushed with the praise. “The warmblood is done.”

Danish Warmbloods are hard to miss so Claire didn’t bother counting the stalls. Angus was bent over picking hooves when she found them. “Christ ye big bastard, hold yer foot up!” Claire giggled at the ass crack he was presenting to the world. When Angus stood up he reached for the wall until his head stopped spinning. “Ah, now my whole team is sick. Honestly Angus I...” He put a hand up to stop the talking. He turned bloodshot eyes on her, “I’m sufferin enough lass dinna think this was purposeful.” She took pity on him, “well I hope you had fun and I appreciate their help with plaiting.” Angus grunted and mumbled something about fuckin virgins then headed for the schooling pen. Claire hung her coat up on Jag’s stall and zipped her chaps on before walking the warmblood outside. Angus was leaning on the fence with his head down. Claire looked for a jump to climb on so she could mount this huge horse and finally called Angus for help. “There ye go lass. I’ll be right here.” Angus found a flat-topped jump and laid down on it. Claire rolled her eyes. “Okay big guy, you can make it easy on yourself and listen to my leg, or it gets very hard. She brought the crop to the side so he could see it and he flinched away from it. There was an instant improvement in his energy as Claire shortened the reins and pushed him forward. After twenty minutes of collected riding, he was cutting corners and pulling to lower his head. The next corner he felt a spur on the opposite side and moved into the corner. Two more sharp reminders and the giant capitulated. He was ready. Now, to get off this brute.

Claire was a bit annoyed that Rupert wasn’t waiting to hand her Jag but she saw him coming towards her along with a head butt from Jag to get going. Claire giggled and swung up feeling her legs lock into him like a hand and glove. Jag was ready to run feeling the excitement of the crowd and colors everywhere. She was delighted with his extra energy and after twenty minutes she patted his neck and hugged him before jumping down. Rupert was there this time and Claire woke him up to take Jag back.

Claire felt her nerves as she waited on the warmblood to enter the ring. “Head up handsome.” Angus kept one eye open and waited for the horse to fall asleep in front of the judges. Claire gave him a hard leg during a cantering circle but the judges couldn’t see it. It was enough to finish the test. Claire faced the judges and saluted. Once she was back on the ground she heaped praise on the horse, scratching his face and chest. She pushed up her stirrups and looked around for her teammates. Exasperated she pulled the reins over his head and led him back to the barn. “Excuse me, miss!” Claire stopped and looked at a gentleman and a younger girl that looked like his daughter. “This is the import for sale?” Claire explained he hadn’t been ridden much in the past few months but he was sweet and willing. She noticed the girl was drawn to the horse and had love in her eyes as she ran
her hand down his neck. “Do you want to ride him?” Her face said hell yes! Claire gave her a leg up
and adjusted her stirrups. “Ready when you are honey.” Claire chatted with the father and admired
the girl's seat and quiet leg. “She is very good.” Dad beamed, “she has earned a good horse, worked
very hard to get to this level. What she hopes for is eventing. Claire smiled at that, “a girl after my
own heart.”

Rupert walked up looking sheepish and Claire glared at him. She didn’t talk to buyers and had no
idea what she was doing. She introduced Rupert to the Dad and excused herself. She could hardly
wait to call Jaime and tell him the horse made it through the test and there was a potential buyer.
Hearing his voice was grounding and she felt a connection to someone who really cared how she did
today. She sighed when she felt herself lock into Jaime in her mind. “I guessed he did well because
I’ve had two calls already, just inquiries. You did an amazing job Sassenach. The rest of the
weekend is just for you and Jag. How does he seem today?” Claire laughed, he feels like a coiled
spring actually. I’m afraid he won’t relax for his test.” They talked a bit more, Jaime said he was
feeling better but would wait for cross country later in the day. Claire hung up knowing he was still
weak. She called the hotel and ordered a huge lunch and more juice.

Rupert led Jag out to Claire and gave her a leg up. “Do ye have the changes memorized lass?” She
did. Angus came with a towel soaked in shine that he rubbed all over Jag and Claire's boots. “Ye
turned -out fine lass.” She smiled down at him, “thanks for the help you guys.”

There was a different vibe to the riders that she was competing against. They all seemed to know
each other and looked Claire up and down before walking their horse away. It felt uncomfortable
like they were judging her. A rider nudged her horse up next to Claire. “Hi, my name is Cindy.
Don’t let those girls get to you. They are just very rich and entitled and look down on us common
folk. Jesus, I hope you’re not royalty or something. Ha, that would be bad!” Claire laughed and
introduced herself. She liked this Cindy and they talked until it was time for Claire’s test. She heard
her name announced and smiled when they said: “On Sassenach’s Jag.” From the moment he
stepped into the arena Jag was flawless and Claire was calmly moving with him like an extension of
his body. She turned to the judges and saluted before walking out of the ring. She smiled at the
crowd clapping for her.

Claire looked around for the guys and felt let down they weren’t there. She jumped down and heard
Angus’s excited voice behind her. He was on his cell phone and Rupert was reminding him of things
he forgot. She looked at their excited faces and couldn’t believe it. “Jaime wants to talk to ye lass.”
Claire took the phone and heard Jaime laughing. “A great start Sassenach. Angus gave me all the
details as you performed the test. He thinks you and Jag looked perfect, better than the others.” His
voice got lower, “I hope yer havin fun lass, always. I’m proud of ye and want ye to rest before the
cross country. Rupert is bringin ye back.” Claire felt the stinging in her eyes and tried to push back
the tears. She hugged Jag for some cover and wiped her face. They were all invested in her
performance and genuinely excited she did so well. “Thank you both,” she said wiping tears off her
cheeks. Rupert grabbed her hand and pulled her to his truck. “We have dates this afternoon so hurry
up and I’ll take ye to Jaime.

She was so happy to see Jaime. She sat in his lap and looked at his face. His color was back, he
looked better. He stroked her back with his good arm and kissed her softly. He looked at her red-
rimmed eyes and the tears she was holding back. He swung her to the bed and asked what was
wrong. “Nothing is wrong, I just felt alone because those guys were hung over and unhelpful all
morning, the girls were mean, and I wanted someone who cared how I did, which is ridiculous.”
Jaime pulled her to him, “ah lass, the lads would walk on hot coals to support ye, dinna fash.” She
looked at him gratefully. “I dinna think yer comfortable in all those clothes. Let me help ye with
that.” Claire laughed and got up pulling her jacket off and looked down at her boots. “How do I get
these off?” Jaime held out his hand and she turned around lifting her boot to him. He watched her
peel off her layers and pull up the shortest pair of shorts he had ever seen. His erection banged into his confining jeans and he groaned.

Claire laid against pillows, naked except for tiny shorts and filled Jaime in on all the details. He made sounds like he was listening while his eyes raked over her long legs, tight stomach, and soft breasts that moved when she did. He moved over her lower body and let his tongue look under the shorts for her. “Jaime, no, I smell like a horse!” He laid his tongue flat against her and she drew a sharp breath. He slowly curled his tongue around her building heat and saw her back arch. He kneeled to use his good arm to pull her shorts off and stretched out beside her letting his tongue find what thrrobbed. Her head was back, eyes closed, panting. “Watch me mo chridhe, I insist.” Claire’s eyes fixed on him and he saw her heat building. He pushed her legs open and thrust his tongue inside her making her pant and moan. He held her open and slowly slid his tongue up flicking her until he pushed her into an explosive orgasm. “Jesus Christ that was hot.” She was breathing hard and euphoric. “Turn over lass and put yer hands against the headboard. Jaime jumped off the bed and pulled his clothes off. Kneeling behind her he looked at her ass and watched her body stretch around him as he entered her slowly. “Christ lass.” Having only one hand to hold her steady was not going to make it happen. “Help me lass, push into me with yer hands. She pushed and moaned finding her rhythm quickly. Jaime was loving her round butt slamming into him as he watched. She heard him growl and hold her to him as he released and shuddered. Jaime pulled Claire into a spoon and they slept.

Jaime heard his cell buzzing him out of sleep. He patted the bed until he found it. “They moved Claire to fourth rider and cross country started already.” Jaime sat up, “what?” Claire looked at him concerned. “Get dressed lass, they moved ye up.” Claire jumped out of bed wide-eyed looking for her clothes. “Oh shit, my clothes are hanging on Jag’s stall Jaime!” They jumped in the truck and headed to the showground. Claire pulled her bun out and ran fingers through her hair. She would have to pile it under her jumping helmet because no hair can show for this event. Rupert had Jag tacked up and Claire slipped into the stall to pull on a new pair of breeches and boots. Jaime held her jacket for her and Rupert put her medical wrist band on. She bent over and pulled her helmet and hair on strapping it under her chin. She pulled her gloves on as Rupert led Jag to the field. Jaime turned her toward him. “Breathe Sassenach and remember to have fun.” She looked up at him, “anything else?” He smiled at her, “Jag depends on you to find the jumps and control his speed, you depend on him to clear the jumps. We saw nothin out there he canna do.” He kissed her and felt the quaking in his own stomach. When she was mounted a pretty blonde girl looked her up and down with a disapproving face. When Claire entered the starter box the same girl walked her horse next to Jaime, “Aren’t you Jaime Fraser?” He was walking away and said “aye” over his shoulder. “Where are the guys?”Jaime stood right next to her.” They went into the field to watch ye deeper in. Good luck love.”

Jag and Claire bounded into the field. Jag was excited and Claire slowed him a bit with her seat. “Pace herself Jag” she laughed. He soared over the first seven jumps and wasn’t even breathing hard yet. Claire felt confident but as the water loomed ahead she gritted her teeth to keep them from chattering. As they approached Jag’s ears snapped forward and he was focused. Claire pulled him back before he jumped into the water. Jag shook his head side to side fighting the bit and Claire realized she was pulling on his mouth. “Jesus! Jag I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. Go Jag!” The horse extended and flew through the geometric obstacles that worried Claire. She saw Jaime’s hand cut the straight line through all of them and pointed Jag toward it. The jumps came quickly with a single stride between them so she stayed off his back until he leaped out of the water. “Good boy Jag!” Claire panicked when she approached and saw her jump on the ground in pieces. She looked around frantically until she saw the white and red flags and pointed Jag to it. Jag was breathing hard and she checked his sides to see if he was struggling. “Good boy Jag, go!” She felt him extend under her as he climbed the hills to the next cluster. Claire looked ahead at the impossible. A completely enclosed circle jump that was barely big enough for a horse to get through. She checked the flags and felt her
heart racing. “You can do this Jag. I know you can, it just looks scary.” His ears were pinned as he raced toward it. Claire pressed into Jag’s shoulder so she didn’t get knocked out of the saddle. She gave a whoop! “That was awesome Jag!” The second water jumps were in view and Claire was mindful not to pull him back. She was exhausted and struggling to breathe. “I trust you Jag, find the speed you need.” As they entered the water she felt his hind end pull in to clear a high in-and-out then extend himself to jump out of the water. Claire saw the mile four sign and didn’t think they could make it. Jag was breathing hard and her legs were shaking. “Go Jag!” There were eight jumps in the last mile and several were built over ditches five feet across. She heard Jaime say ‘ye arena jumping, he is, and he can do it.’ She put a leg on him between jumps and eased off as they approached so Jag could set his own length of stride. The last jump came into view but Claire couldn’t focus her eyes, everything was blurry. “One more Jag.” He sailed over the jump and Claire put a hard leg on him. “go Jag we’re almost done!”

Jamie saw the dust cloud as he searched for them. “C’mon ye two.” When he saw them Jag was covered in sweat and still in an extended gallop. Claire was off his back and he could see her leg on him, pushing him. They raced across the finish line and Claire sat back in the saddle to slow Jag down. Jaime was punching numbers into his phone calculator and when he pushed the equal sign his smile was radiant. Claire was hugging Jag and patting him with a huge smile on her face. Her hand patted into wet fur and Jag continued to breathe heavy as she walked him. Jaime handed her a bottle of water and she drank it gratefully. “Oh my God that is good!” She jumped off and pushed her stirrups up and continued walking to cool Jag off. “How did we do?” Jaime was beaming, “ye did 470 Sassenach! Better than I hoped.” Claire hugged Jag “did you hear that? Better than he hoped!”

Rupert and Angus caught up to them at the barn and showed her the video they took with their phones. They were thrilled with her time. Claire led Jag to the wash rack and let the cold water wash over him. The horse sighed making her laugh. She snapped a lead to get him back to his stall. He rubbed his face up and down her body. “You’re the best boy Jag.”
Chapter 25

Claire was slow to wake up Sunday morning. Each time she surfaced the pain in her legs and back made her surrender once more to sleep. She finally opened her eyes and groaned with the pain. How could she ride like this and why was she this sore? She swung her legs off the bed and sucked air through her teeth. When she stood up the pain in her back nearly made her pass out. Each step was an enormous effort and she got very worried. “I can’t ride like this.” She whispered. “It’s alright Sassenach,” Jaime was struggling to control his laughter. “Look! Yer already to the bathroom!” His voice sounded like he was coaching someone through special Olympics. She glared at him, holding her lower back. “A very hot shower will help mo chridhe. I dinna mean to laugh, I know that pain love.” She glared at him again, “you could have warned me!” Jaime smiled, “dinna fash, by noon the pain will be gone.”

The shower was hot and ready and Claire looked at the height of the tub she had to step over. She tried three times but could not lift her leg. “Jesus Christ, this is terrible!” Her voice was shaking like tears were coming. Jaime’s voice was behind her. “Let me help ye sweetheart.” He picked her up awkwardly with his one arm and set her down in the hot water. He filled his big hands with soap and spread it all over her back, rubbing the muscles softly while he carefully avoided the water on his injured side. He spread soap on her thighs and rubbed the inside muscles until his erection became unbearable. He thought about her crotch pumping in the saddle, “lucky horse,” he murmured.

Claire’s eyes were huge and she pointed at his erection, “no, not possible!” Jaime laughed and put shampoo on her hair massaging with his only hand. She put her hands up to take over and felt Jaime press himself into her, “don’t deprive me lass, I love doin this.” Claire had her hands on the side wall to steady herself and Jaime tipped her head back to rinse her hair. She felt his soapy erection between her legs as he pushed forward and back again, moaning in her ear. His erection made contact with her heat and she opened her mouth to breathe. Claire’s hand pressed him to her body as he moved forward and back. “That’s a good lass” he hissed. He could tell she was ready to come and bent his legs to thrust into her. He made sure her body did not move much because he didn’t want to cause her pain. “Jesus Jaime that is…oh God…harder please! His hot fingers touched her heat as he drove into her. She pushed her head back and moaned into her orgasm for a solid minute. Jaime let it go and held her to him as he chased after her in throws of his own explosion.

Claire turned around wincing with the pain and hugged him tight around the waist. She opened her eyes to the dripping sling and gauze on Jaime’s wound. “Holy shit! I need to change the dressing on your arm and get the sling dried immediately. She bent to turn the water off and growled with pain. She lifted her leg to step out of the tub and was surprised she could do it. “Maybe it will be better by noon.” Jaime smiled encouragingly and stuffed the truth down.

Claire pulled the sopping dressing off Jaime’s arm and grimaced at the wet wound. “Christ, we messed up.” Jaime laughed at touched her cheek, “so glad yer takin responsibly for rapin me in the shower lass.” He laughed and she glared. Claire pulled the lampshade off and positioned Jaime’s wound close to the bulb to speed drying. Pup was shoving his nose into her calf and she looked down at his need to pee. “Damn, with your arm like this you can’t walk him for me.” Jaime’s good hand grabbed her arm, “tis the best medicine for your stinging muscles lass.” Claire whined at the job before her and reached for her cut-offs. She stood bent over and tried to lift her leg into them. “I can’t.” Jaime took the shorts and grabbed a shirt and her sandals. He dressed her and handed her the leash.

Claire took three stiff strides to the door and stopped until the stinging subsided. “This may take
some time so keep your arm next to the bulb.” Opening the door she felt her back muscles scream in protest but she finally got out the door. “My poor lass” he whispered.

By the time they walked into the field nearby she was taking normal strides and the pain was manageable. After she threw the ball twenty times her back was not stinging so much. She signed in relief. Claire knew stadium jumping was her opportunity to close the point gap with the leaders. It was her ace in the hole and she couldn’t let all the work and preparation go for naught. Her spirits were much improved when she walked into their room almost like normal. Jaime smiled with understanding.

Claire redressed Jaime’s wound, replaced the lampshade and hung the sling over it to dry. She pulled her hair into a ponytail and did her makeup while Jaime consumed breakfast for three. She would warm Jag up right before she jumped so there was plenty of time. Jaime watched her pull her clean breeches and blouse on while he swallowed an omelet.

Claire had accumulated penalties in dressage for a late change and in cross country for nicking four jumps. She not only had to complete the stadium jumping, she had to be faster with less penalty points than the others to close the gap.

He knew all the riders on the leader board and had nothing but contempt for them. They batted their eyes at him and flirted like they were worth his time. They would make this sport miserable for Claire until she put them in their place. C’mon Claire, he thought, ye need to dig deep.

“I know ye can do this Sassenach. I won’t lie to ye lass, it’s gonna hurt like hell, for both ye and Jag. But ye both will do it for each other once ye start. This is what ye’ve been building, a dedication to the other to give what’s needed in each moment. He feels sore today too, but he’ll be there for ye one-hundred percent.” Claire tried to smile. “I’m doing this. I haven’t worked this hard to quit now.”

Claire’s cell was ringing and an agitated Rupert was giving her news she did not want to hear. “Jag is down and will’na get up!” Claire looked at Jaime in horror and threw the phone like it was a hot potato. “Jag won’t get up!” Jaime asked all the right questions, did he eat today, is he asleep, does he try and can’t get up. “We’re on our way.” He pulled Claire’s stiff body to him, “Jag is worn out and sore, just like you. Dinna fash love, he’ll get up.” Jaime felt his stomach churning but kept his face an encouraging mask.

When they walked into the barn Claire couldn’t help herself and she started running to Jag’s stall. “Jesus Jag, you must get up!” Jaime looked in, “the laddie’s asleep!” He walked to their supplies and came back with sweet treats and grain laced with vitamin E and protein powder that he poured into the feeder. Jag’s ears twitched toward a noise he knew very well. He finally opened his eyes and got up groaning. He dove into the food with gusto. Jaime asked for another scoop of grain, a bottle of electrolytes and salt added to his water. “He needs it today.” Rupert came back with the grain and a large salt lick. A call came for Jaime and he wandered outside to have a conversation.

Claire stepped into the stall gingerly with “oof” and “ou” with every step. Rupert looked at Angus, “the lass canna walk.” Claire shot him a withering look, “I hate it when you talk like I’m not here.” Angus looked back at Rupert, “how’s she gonna ride then?” Claire rolled her eyes in exasperation and headed for the supply room.

Jaime was clicking off his call as he approached the guys. “What was your post care last night?” Rupert told him, “twenty minutes cold hose all around but mostly on the back legs followed by sore no more. I hand walked him for a bit two hours later. He dinna have hot spots and seemed fine. He got a bottle of electrolytes and a wee pinch of salt in his water. “Perfect Rupert. It’s up to Jag now and my money is on him.” Rupert walked after Jaime, “ah, the lass canna walk.” Jaime stopped and turned around to Rupert, “my money is on her as well.”
Jaime found Claire in the tack room sitting on her footlocker. Her eyes were closed and she was perfectly still. “What’s this then lass?” She peaked at him, “I’m repairing my sodium pumps with meditation.” Jaime sat next to, “are ye now.” Claire took a deep cleansing breath. “Yes! Muscles contract by pumping sodium across their membrane. The pumps actually explode during strenuous exercise and the membrane swells causing pain and soreness.” She opened her eyes and looked at Jaime, “I’ll try anything at this point.”

Jaime kissed her so sweetly and ran his finger along her jaw. His ice-blue eyes held her gaze and she felt all was right in the world when he looked her that way. “Rupert has Jag tacked up and he’s walkin him in the pasture near the schooling pen. Yer up in twenty minutes or so. Have ye memorized the course Sassenach?” His low voice and piercing blue eyes had her in a trance, “hm?” He put some volume and energy to his voice, “It’s time sweet lass.” Claire’s spine stiffened, “what? Time to ride, oh Christ I need to take my aspirin right away!”

Claire found Rupert and Jag and looked up at the saddle wondering how she was going to get in it. “Christ,” she whispered. Rupert put his hand out to give her a leg up and watched her face clench against the pain. “Once ye start ye won’t feel it any more lass.” She looked at him gratefully even though he was dead wrong. Rupert led her to the pen and cringed at the pain in her face with every stride. “Jaime put his money on the wrong team this time.”

Claire gave Jag a twenty minute warm up and went to the arena to wait her turn. A barbie-doll blonde rode up on both sides of her. She looked at each and smiled. Talking across her one said to the other, “I’m surprised she could get on her horse! Did you see her trying to walk!” The other girl had a nasty laugh, “we’re taking bets on which fence she gets launched from. I claimed the first fence and I could use the cash so she better lose it on the first jump.” Claire's heart rate shot up and she felt her cheeks burn from the insults but kept her eyes forward. The girl to her right said, “she’s Jaime Fraser’s rider. What are you his cousin or something? My God he’s fine and he better get the hint this year that I want that body, naked, any place he chooses.” The other girl laughed, “get in line bitch.”

Claire’s misery turned to hatred for these nasty girls. Every word they spoke cemented her resolve to hurt them where it counted, in the arena. “Claire Beauchamp on The Sassenach’s Jag” was announced and Claire looked at the girls, “put your sunglasses on girls, I don’t want you to miss one moment of this.” The girl’s let their mouth’s hang open and Claire laughed at that.

Claire felt Jag tense as they walked into the arena, he was ready. When the arm came down to start the clock She pushed Jag into a canter and pointed him at the first jump. He had a lot of speed and soared over the jumps. “C’mon Jag faster and keep your feet tucked up!” The jump angles were tight and a high in-and-out was next. He cleared both jumps easily. she put her leg on him and kept it there. Angus was very agitated, “what the hell is she doin? If he trips or buggers at that speed it’ll kill her Jaime!” For the next six jumps she pushed his speed and had not heard a pole drop yet. Perfect so far. She kept her leg on him using his speed to gain height and sail high over the jumps. She could not let him slow down and nick a jump. It was tough to make the tight angles but Claire had faith and chose to risk everything with this break-neck speed. She heard the crowd murmur over his last three jumps and then the crowd went crazy. She was trying to slow Jag down but she heard “Claire Beauchamp, The Sassenach’s Jag, a perfect round!” Her red lipstick made the smile impossible to miss. She patted Jag as she made for the gate. She waved to the crowd and pouted at the two girls who looked plainly shocked. Jaime exhaled the breath he had been holding since she cantered toward the first jump.

Claire looked up and there was her team. Angus was jumping up and down and Rupert’s cheeks were red and bunched into a smile. Her eyes met Jaime’s and he nodded with pride and something unknown in his eyes. She nearly fell off Jag, something anticipated by Jaime as he caught her. He
held onto her because her legs had gone wobbly. He kissed her deeply and she broke away to point at the girls, “those barbie bitches want you naked and you can name the place!” He looked at their horrified faces, “not ever love.” and he laughed, holding her up. Claire threw her arms around Jag’s neck and squeezed him. “You are an amazing boy! My God you’re brave!” She was momentarily crushed by the weight of what she had risked and dropped her forehead to his face. "Never again big guy, I promise," she whispered.

As they walked back to the barn people stopped her to weigh in on her incredible ride. Many commented on Jag and some told her she had a death wish riding the course at that speed. Claire just smiled and thank them all, even the critics. Jaime leaned down, “I’ll be have’na word with ye about your speed later lass,” as he smacked her butt.

Rupert did post care on Jag and Angus started packing up and loading the trailer with tack, food, and footlockers. Jaime and Claire left to check out of their hotel and grab Pup. Claire stared out the windshield smiling as she replayed their ride over and over in her head. She knew she would have to defend her judgment regarding her speed. But for these few moments, she let herself revel in what they had done when they were both barely able to walk.

Jaime turned the truck off and leaned toward her. “It’s time for a whiskey lass.” He walked around to open her door and when she moved her scream was eardrum piercing. Jaime reached for her, “I wondered when the adrenalin would wear off.” Because he couldn’t carry her, it took ten minutes to get her to the room. Jaime moved quickly giving her a glass of whiskey and helping her sit down. “I’m fixin a nice bath for ye mo chridhe. It will make ye feel so much better.” Claire laid back moaning and closed her eyes. The pain was intolerable and when she heard the door open and close several times she just didn’t care to look. She didn’t recognize the next sound but it was loud followed by a short burst of water in the tub.

Jaime came to help her up. “Come lass, it’s all ready for ya. Let’s get yer clothes off. He carefully removed her jacket, shirt, boots, and breeches. When Claire looked at the tub full of ice she spun in the other direction before Jaime gently turned her toward the tub. “Now Claire, just ease yerself in slowly with yer arms. She shook her head side to side. ‘I’ve suffered enough! Getting drunk does the same thing as this torture- no more pain. She had both feet in the water and was cold already. “How long?” She asked. “Five minutes Sassenach and I’ll be waitin with all these towels to warm ye up. Go on now, get in there.” To his utter amazement, she sat down in ice and leaned back so her back was under the water. She kept her eyes closed and teeth clenched to keep from chattering. “Time!” she yelled. “Two minutes Sassenach.”

Claire lifted herself out of the hateful bath and was covered in warm towels. Jaime helped her out of the tub and dried her legs. She was stunned at the improvement as the pain was very tolerable. Jaime handed her three aspirin and a glass of whiskey. There was a flash of lightning and loud thunder followed by a downpour of rain. It was three o’clock in the afternoon and looked like night time outside. Jaime dimmed the lights and told Claire to lay on her stomach. He rubbed his hands together warming up the oil before spreading on her back. “Oh, Jaime that is helping so much.” He felt relief, “aye, its what was done to us during competition.” His big hand rubbed across the muscles with the lightest pressure. She turned over “please do my legs Jaime they’re starting to sting.” He looked around helplessly. ‘ah, ye have to turn over Sassenach.” He piled pillows on her so just her legs were showing. “Jaime. What are you doing?” He was feeling frantic. “I am makin it look like ye arena here, just yer legs. Bur those wee feet are attached. That isna good.” Claire was laughing at her perfectly befuddled love. She knew his bur came out when he was tired or mentally twisted. She guessed this was the latter. Jamie looked around for something else to pile on top of her. “Jaime?” He put his ear toward the pile, “yes?” Her words were muffled. He saw her arm shoot out and grab pillows off her back. “No!” Jaime was putting them back just as fast. Finally, she sat up and took a
deep breath holding his hand in hers to stop a repeated burial.

“Why are you trying to bury me Jaime?” He smiled, “no lass, no to bury ye! Just to hide the rest of ye when I touch yer inner thighs. I canna help it Sassenach. If I touch ye there I might make a pest of myself. Once today is enough.” She squeezed oil in her hands and laid back on the pillows. “I understand and I love you for such kindness. I can do it,” she said through giggles. She spread the oil on her sore inner thighs and kept her eyes closed. She pressed her fingers into the muscle and smoothed them out. Sometimes breathing through the pain which sounded much like erotica to Jaime. He watched her and licked his lips. He knew the pain started in the groin, but she couldn’t reach it. Jaime’s eyes looked at her towel parted in the middle. Her wet panties were clinging to her and he could see through them. He put oil in his palm and reached deep into her groin moving his thumb down the muscle belly. He grabbed the other side and did the same release. “Okay Sassenach. All done.” Jaime shot off the bed and started grabbing things to stuff in his suitcase. He just had to keep moving.

“Jaime” she whispered. He looked at her naked body laying across several pillows, “I still need your help.” His eyes were wide as she moved her index finger across her bulging bud. She gasped when she touched it and arched her back. Jaime laid on the bed inches from her finger. She reached for his face and held his jaw pulling him toward her. Jaime felt light-headed watching the erotic display. She held herself open and pulled his mouth to her. He pushed her knees up and licked her to the edge and then stopped. She cried out for him to finish her but he couldn’t. His daring Sassenach who broke free of the chains around her heart and body, and overcame the imprisonment of her sexuality deserved to be rewarded for this bravery. She was magnificent. He eased into her, careful not to put any weight on her. She looked up at him, "I love you so." Several thrusts and he dropped back to the bed and sucked on her lightly until she was begging him. He pushed his fingers deep into her and flicked her with a wicked tongue until she screamed as she was thrown into the whirlwind. Jamie slipped into her and pressed into her cervix as her strong inner muscles pulled him to completion. He felt the release of every muscle that knotted watching her jump.

Jamie looked down at his angel, hair fanned out over the pillows and her eyes closed. He felt love for her so deep it was hard to manage at times. His mind went back to the first night he pulled her out of Fred's stall, and all the moments burned into his heart since then. His mind pleaded, don't break my heart Claire, please.

They would have a serious discussion when they got back home and the outcome would reveal an end to all they shared or the beginning of forever. He laid beside her and whispered, “I love ye lass.”
Chapter 26

The rain in Palm Springs stopped the show for over an hour, much to the delight of Rupert and Angus who cornered their lassies in hideaway places on the showgrounds. Both men wandered back to the barn with red puffy lips and a kink in their step. A parting gift from a virgin. Rupert walked up and looked at Angus, “well, did’ye?” Angus shook his head, “you?” Another head shake. They each took a horse and started wrapping tails and legs.

Jaime and Claire rolled in shortly after and they checked Jag for injuries and then loaded him into the trailer. The Warmblood came next. Jaime had gotten a low offer on the horse that would have covered the owner’s price but he was confident he could do better. Trouble on the ramp brought Jaime outside where Rupert struggled to get the horse up the ramp. “C’mon ye big bastard or we leave ye behind.” Jaime put his hand up to stop Rupert. He looked through the bags stowed in Rupert’s truck bed and came back with a large red apple. Holding the end of the lead he took a big bite, walked up the ramp and turned around to face the huge horse. He held the apple out to him and raised his eyebrows. The horse stared at the apple but didn’t move. Jaime looked him in the eye and took another bite, and another, and held the apple out to him. The horse walked up the ramp and into the trailer where he ate the remainder. With everything stowed and the horses locked in, Jaime looked around for Claire and Pup. He sent the guys on their way and went looking.

Jaime whistled for Pup who came racing around a corner a few seconds later. He walked in that direction and saw Claire speaking close to another woman. As he got closer he noticed it was a young woman, maybe eighteen, if that. She was crying and Claire was speaking to her softly. Jaime leaned against a stall and waited where she could see him. He didn’t want to interrupt. He didn’t notice they were walking toward him until he heard the sobbing, and for some reason, it broke his heart. He walked out of the barn to wait in the truck. Claire walked the girl to their trailer talking softly and Jaime saw the girl look up through the warmblood’s window with tears streaming down her face. The girl hugged Claire and she walked to her car nearby. Claire met Jaime’s eyes in the side window, “sorry.”

Claire buckled in with Pup in the middle. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting Jaime. I couldn’t leave her until she calmed down.” He looked across the seat at her beautiful eyes that were so far away. While she typed furiously on her cell phone for the first ten minutes, Jaime’s mind drifted to Scotland where the Heather swayed in the wind and Lallybroch spread out amid dark green fields and ancient outbuildings. He heard the distinctive sound the screen door made when it snapped shut and the peel of laughter from his sister Jenny. He felt homesick and thought about the last Hogmanay and how he was welcomed home.

Claire pushed Pup over and pressed against Jaime. “I love you,” she purred and pressed her face into his arm. She told him Sarah Barker was ready to meet and finalize their agreement. She spoke quietly about their plans. Jaime realized as soon as she came close to him Scotland disappeared in his mind and so did his homesickness.

Claire yawned through another series of text messages but kept her head against Jaime. She put her phone away and her arm came around his waist. “Yer dead on yer feet lass. Lay in my lap and sleep a bit, it’s still three hours to Phoenix.” She groaned moving her sore limbs but cuddled into his lap. She was asleep in minutes.

Bits and pieces of the weekend went through Jaime’s mind. He saw Claire and Jag galloping ahead of their dust plume. Her leg was on him to the bitter end, no matter the cost. When the clock stopped they were both heaving for air like their lives depended on it. He replayed her death-defying speed in
the stadium jumping and saw a brave and talented horse risk life and limb because she asked him to. Jesus, they were lethal together. The barbie bitches would part like the red sea from now on. They would still hate her but they would leave her alone while she blew through levels they would never get to. He felt a weird mix of doom and pride and shook his head.

Jaime didn’t want to think anymore. He turned on the radio and remembered her singing to the western songs between bites of rib meat. Both feeling so close after making love in the middle of the desert, under the stars. He turned the radio off and opened the window. He thought about his life before Claire Beauchamp and looked for all the happy memories. He kept looking. In the early days, there were milestones of success. When he bought the property, when the house was finally finished, when the ledger went from red to black, when his best friends came to America. But he couldn’t find the happiness he felt when she launched herself into his arms and kissed him all over his face. “You gave me Jag!” he heard her say. But that was a special surprise, a one-time event.

Real life was mundane and repetitive, like the constant bickering between Claire and Rupert. He could see Rupert with his head down, “Claire said if she bumps into me one more time she’ll have my balls in a vice.” Jaime was pretty sure Angus pissed himself laughing over that. And the tattling on each other, “sorry Jaime, I don’t think it’s safe so I need to tell ye Claire’s asleep on her horse.” The conspiring, “Claire, poor lass, got her, ah… well, it got stuck in the window.”

What about the creepy short-hand language she speaks with Angus, it must be miserable for him. He watches her lower leg and sees her do something that he gets him crazy mad until she rides up on him and they both say stuff no one understands. Next thing ye know, both their heads are shaking yes and Angus swings up to fix the problem. Squeeks, grunts, pointing and nodding. End of conversation. Normal people don’t communicate that way. They aren’t normal.

Jaime let out a long breath in defeat. When he looked deep in his soul, before Claire, from one day to the next, he lived a good life without memorable happiness in it. With Claire, his days are full, to the brim, with that elusive feeling the entire world is seeking. Happiness. The difference in his life has been like black and white to technicolor.

He ran his hand down her arm. He needed to touch her. Reassure himself that for now, she is here, sleeping in his lap, his happiness. You have the heart of a champion Claire. No mistakin it this weekend. I wanted to wait. Watch from the sidelines while you rediscovered your passion to compete. Watch you make a decision to stay with me because ye canna live without me. I canna do it my sweet lass. I’m too selfish and guarded and happy in the moment with you. I have to ask ye the impossible question or lose my mind.

Jaime had no doubt that Claire loved him. He imagined her telling him, ‘it’s only five months and I will be back to stay’. She will believe it with all her heart. Just like he did each time he left someone behind. He never went back to any of them because his heart beat for the thrill on the field, the roar of the crowd, and domination in his sport. When the season was over he came back, or stayed in Europe, to kick it with someone new. When August came around he was gone again chasing his ambition. Suddenly he saw a couple sets of eyes he remembered, full of tears and heartbreak. Then there were more. “Jesus Christ. I’m sorry.”

This would be easier if he didn’t recognize the signs or know how strongly it would grip her. She wants to win more than she wants to breathe. He hoped he was wrong because it’s a gladiator’s world and love doesn’t survive. Jaime never considered himself an insecure man but he never had this much to lose, laying in his lap. It’s comin lass, please forgive me, but I see ye for the diamond that ye are and I’ll fight the whole world to keep ye, but I won’t fight you.

As Jaime turned up Ironwood he rubbed his hand down Claire’s back and butt. She yawned and sat
up next to him. Once she had her bearings she melted into him placing tiny kisses from his collar bone to his jaw. “I love you Jaime. Thank you for this weekend,” she whispered in his ear. Pup was humping at the window sensing they were near home. Claire laughed and pressed the button down. “He’s getting rather bossy don’t you think?” When the truck stopped they both got out, grabbed a horse, food, special water for Jag, lights off, and headed for home.

As they walked up the road Claire could hear the coyotes screaming in the desert. She clung to Jaime and shivered. “Why aren’t you scared of them?” He looked down at her in the dark and thought the only one I’m scared of is you.

They nibbled food and Claire asked Jaime about the mean girls and what they said about him. “They’re groupies, thinkin I can fix their riding issues, and willin to give sex in return. That’s all it is mo chridhe.

The hot shower they shared was renewing and when they dropped into bed they clung to each other, each seeking the reassurance they were loved. Claire ran her hand down Jaime’s chest and licked his nipple. Be careful lass. If ye get me started it could be a very late night. “Why is that,” she asked as her hand lightly touched the skin of his stomach.

Jaime turned toward her and smiled. “Because the third orgasm takes some time, and effort love.” Claire sat up quickly, and then grabbed her back and moaned. “Really?” Jaime laughed and reached for her, twisting her gently into his spoon. “Your body needs to heal mo chridhe.” She snuggled into him, “I love you so,” she purred.

Claire was very intrigued by the third orgasm and she started making a plan to bring this to fruition. Her master plan would have to wait because three minutes into it she was no longer conscious.

In a house far away from Fraser’s Equestrian Center, Ruby bent over her desk and layered in the graphite shadows that brought the Warmblood into 3-D, like he was standing in front of her. She drew him from her near perfect memory and she found comfort bringing him to life this way. She was almost finished with this one and started to yawn. She decided to finish tomorrow and avoid the risk of falling asleep before her numerous pictures were locked away.

She would keep her pictures and her sadness away from her parents and grandmother because it would hurt them to know how heartbroken she was. They saved everything they could for the past five years when her obsession started, but they would never have enough for a horse like that.

Ruby worked two jobs to pay for her car and lessons. She needed a car to get to work, to get paid, so she could ride. Any spare time was spent lifting heavy objects in sets and repetitions that would build the muscle she needed to make a Warmblood dance in dressage, fly through a field of obstacles, and climb mountain-sized jumps in the arena.

Ruby looked at the center picture on her wall. ‘Luck is when opportunity meets preparation’ with rose vines painted over and through the letters. Her luck today was getting to ride the horse of her dreams and meeting Claire. She had a great idea, she would send Claire the picture she almost finished. To say thank you. She really didn’t want to cry anymore but she pulled the Warmblood into her mind to say goodbye.

If Ruby understood how solidly the odds were stacked against her she would have moved to Hollywood to become a famous actress. For that pursuit, her odds were far better.
Chapter 27

Claire opened her eyes to a gray day. Apparently, the rain followed them and gave the desert a good soaking during the night. Jaime was up already for his sunrise ride and Claire got to the window as fast as her body would allow. Jaime wasn’t there and she could tell by the lack of hoof prints that he hadn’t been. So why leave their bed she wondered.

Once under the hot water, her mind started to clear. She remembered last night when Jaime had taken a pass on sex. He had never done that before and she wondered.

Claire was dressed and walking down the road to the barn when she saw who she hoped was Sarah Barker pull in. Rupert greeted her and showed her around a bit until Claire walked in. She looked into the kindest eyes she had ever seen and offered her hand in greeting. “I feel like I already know you Claire.” With that, she hugged her tightly. Claire introduced Sarah to Angus and then they walked into Jaime’s office. While Claire talked she gave him her gaze and he could feel her loneliness. She wanted to stare at his eyes for the rest of the day but the two women pushed forward.

Claire and Sarah each led a horse to the back pasture and Claire ran through their basic training. “All of their special skills fall into two categories, to assist or to comfort.” Sarah was holding Fred’s lead and Claire asked her to walk up to his chest. Fred brought his head around and lightly pushed her into a hug. “That is remarkable,” she said in awe. “That one act of kindness is all the therapy most of my kids need. Remarkable how good it feels.”

Claire suggested they ride into the Goldfields where they could talk and enjoy what was becoming a gorgeous day. Sarah was thrilled with the idea but confessed she was not used to English saddles. “I think we’ve got western friendly tack around here somewhere and both of these guys neck rein as well as direct rein.” With Rupert’s help Fred was brushed and looked like a cowboy horse while Ginger looked like a princess. Sarah took a call and walked outside. Before Rupert could leave, Claire fumbled with her words and finally pointed at the two horses. “Am I Fred or Ginger Rupert.” His confusion over the question threatened to shut down his cerebral cortex like pulling the battery out of a robot. Claire decided to help him. “Am I Fred or Ginger Rupert?” Claire decided to help him. “Am I Fred or Ginger Rupert?” Poor Rupert was so lost and struggled to understand. Then he remembered hearing that women will always put their true heart’s desire first in a list. That is how a man figures out what they really want for Christmas. He gave Claire his biggest smile and happy eyes, “you’re a 4 lass through and through.” Claire remembered the weekend rubbing elbows with Jaime’s crowd. Beautiful people from eighteen to sixty were at his elbow throughout the time he was at the showgrounds. Claire surmised she didn’t compare well to those females and he was distant because of it. Rupert confirmed she was less than average in looks and she wanted to hide under a blanket and cry.

When Jaime ran into Rupert some hours later he asked how Claire seemed to him today. “Oh, she wanted to know if she was a 4 or a 10. I made the lassie’s day Jaime, told her she was a 4 through and through.” Jaime’s eyes were wide with horror and he ran to get his tack. “Wrong answer Rupert. Get Donus ready for tack, and hurry!” The two men moved like a practiced unit and Jamie was on the road to look for Claire in ten minutes. He could clearly see their tracks so this would be easy. He considered the different ways he could murder Rupert and decided choking the life out of him with his bare hands was most appropriate. Donus covered ground three times as fast as the therapy horses.
and it still took him thirty minutes to find them. They were high above him but he saw them clearly. They were watering the horses in a stream that ran wet after the rain. He saw Sarah talk and Claire just watched the water fun by.

Sarah couldn’t miss the obvious and eventually got Claire to open up and talk about her feelings today. “I can see he loves you Claire, why the insecurity today?” Claire explained that Jaime was famous in the horse world and the barbie bitches wanted him naked. She was not sophisticated and international, she was tribal and mud with no running water. Sarah, knowing none of the facts that created this incredible woman kept it basic at the emotion level. Are you feeling afraid of something specific Claire? Her exotic eyes looked up at Sarah, “I don’t know how, nor do I want to know how to live without him.” Sarah searched for her eyes to lock them in. “Tell him that at your first opportunity. It’s your right to say it. It’s his right to hear it.” Miracles happen when the truth is shared with love and respect for the other. You feel like a fling to him but you actually have no idea what you are to him. His truth might hurt you, but you will grow and learn and make decisions based on fact Claire.”

The quiet moment was abruptly ended when Claire’s body was launched to the ground. “My God, what is that thing!” All Sarah saw was brown fur devouring her new friend. Hearing hooves behind her she whirled to a giant black horse and a giant Jaime on his back. She covered her mouth to stifle a scream.

Jaime pointed at a screaming Claire trying to get out from under Pup. “Dinna fash lass, it’s something they do.” Jaime pulled Pup’s toy from his pocket, squeezed once and threw it into the stream. Pup jumped in after it and bounded out shaking water all over the two women. While this was happening Claire’s eyes were locked on Jaime’s and he wanted desperately to scoop her up and ride away with her.

The women mounted and they rode back together. When Claire looked at Jaime her eyes asked, “do you want me?” His eyes answered, “more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.” Sarah saw volumes of I love you’s cross between them and hoped her new friend would have the courage to speak her truth. Looking at Jaime, and the way he looked at Claire took her breath away. This was a very big deal for both of them. Sarah looked up to heaven and smiled.

Claire hugged Sarah goodbye and thanked her profusely for the talk. They agreed Sarah would take over the care of Fred and Ginger and set up the therapy business immediately. Claire waved as Sarah pulled away. Sarah waved into the rear view mirror just as Jaime was walking up. He pulled her in, “can ye spare some of yer day for a lad who loves ye lass?” The sun was going down and the barn was quiet. Halfway down the driveway Jaime whistled and Pup bounded out of the barn looking for his favorite people.

They walked up the road toward an unknown outcome. Neither of them was completely confident the night would end with two intact hearts, but both were willing to bet it all on the other. Claire opened the freezer looking for something to make for dinner. Jaime pushed the door closed and piled cheese, salami, olives, and crackers on a plate and led Claire to the back yard. “We can order in tonight mo chridhe because we’re spendin time in the truth chair.” He pointed at the lounge and Claire giggled. “Somethin about this chair makes it easy for me to talk to ye.”

Jaime laid down and balanced the plate of food on his chest with his sling hand. The other arm was held out to Claire. She snuggled into him. “The first thing we do is build our cracker. I will build this first one for my Sassenach to teach ye.” On a cracker he layered salami, cheese and an olive on top. “It’s complicated Sassenach, but I know ye can do it.” Claire giggled throughout the demonstration. A sound that made Jaime happy on the inside.
Claire nibbled her cracker while Jaime consumed ten masterpieces. He laid back and announced they forgot the whiskey. “No!” Claire held his chest down while she ran into the house. She watched him from inside and changed her mind about the truth. She knew what he would say and she couldn’t hear it, not ever.

Jaime took the glass from her and she snuggled back into his side. Jaime was pensive. “Tell me Sassenach, what do ye think about yer speed in stadium jumping yesterday?” “Nothing really.” He looked down at her. “What about the critics who said ye had a death wish?” She looked up, “that doesn’t mean I have one. That was the speed I needed so Jag wouldn’t nick a pole. He is green, there are going to be poles on the ground until he gets better at tucking in. I don’t want to wait and I didn’t go to Palm Springs to lose. It was the only alternative.” Jaime’s eyes were closed listening to her.

Claire felt Jaime’s heart jettison away from her and it was confusing. “What would you have done in that situation?” Jaime’s head came up and he looked directly at her amazing eyes. “Exactly what you did love. It nearly scared me half to death but I watched yer seat around the tight corners and ye were locked into him, no lateral movement of yer round ass. He wasn’t likely to unseat ye so I held my breath and watched. I figured Angus would murder ye but your stunning victory made him forget.” Claire pushed herself up on an elbow to look at Jaime. “I’m confused why this is a thing and why you need the truth chair to talk about it.” He touched her cheek and looked at her with pleading eyes, the truth chair is for you.”

Claire looked down and shook her head. “I don’t know where this is coming from or where it’s going, but I will give you the truth as I know it about anything. Jaime laid back and pulled her to him. “I’ve clocked more people through eventing than I can count, fifty at least. They were hobbyists and yer a champion Claire, heart, mind, and soul. With Jag and a lot of hard work, ye will have to show abroad to let the world know who ye are. Ye’ll live like a gladiator half the year and every person ye know becomes someone who wants ye to lose. I had a good friend that was competing at my level. She was married and somehow managed to keep it together. She found out she was pregnant, next day she was no pregnant anymore. She never told her husband she killed his baby. Winning trumps every single thing in your life.”

Claire pulled his face toward her and spoke her truth. “I don’t want that Jaime, never have, never will. If you weren’t in my life I would still not want that. My big win was my medical degree and nothing in this world will ever top that. Well, I suppose giving birth, if I ever do, will top that.” Jaime watched her closely and heard the truth. Giving birth? Having a child, together? In his mind, he could see her holding a bairn, the product of the most astounding love. He shook his head to clear it. My God, he thought, that statement just eclipsed every other thought.

Jaime put his mouth to her ear. "Thank ye Sassenach, for yer truth. It’s yer turn lass. What has shaded yer heart today?” “Ah..well, not much. I woke up feeling weird and lonely. You didn’t ride so why did you leave?” He raised his eyebrows, a bit surprised she would be affected by his absence that much. “I made a mistake yesterday and was tortured by it. I got up to clear my head so I could work.” Claire was trying frantically to get up. “I don’t want to know what you did or with who.” I am ready to stop talking.” It was easy to pin her while his head tried to grab hold of the words that just tumbled out of her mouth. She looked up at him with wide eyes, “are you holding me here?” When she looked at his eyes he said, “stop.”

Jaime held her chin so she couldn’t look away and spoke quietly with conviction. “The mistake I made was in the truck, in my head, watching ye leave me in every variation ye can imagine.” Claire was statue still, “what?” After a deep breath, “my mistake, love, was turning ye into me. Knowin yer actions based on what I would do. What I did. I’m sorry Claire, that I didna consider your heart and mind could be different, your own. It was a grave mistake and I suffered with it. I’m sorry lass.” Claire’s hair had come loose in her struggle to exit the chair and she pushed it away to watch him.
His eyes were burning with his truth. “Oh God, my sweet Jaime.” She lifted his sling and dropped her body on top of him. She kissed him deeply until they couldn’t breathe. She might be a 4 but Jaime wanted her and that was enough.

They walked up the hill to Claire’s house to swim. The storm and clouds moved away and heat settled over the valley. “Sassenach, I must ask ye to attend another important function on Friday night. There will be investors there and I’d like to recruit some new money. Will ye do it?” Claire thought about her week, “sure, I still have time to shop.” One more favor, please dress exactly like ye did for the auction? That stunning dress, and shoes, yer hair, stuff underneath. Will ye wear it again, please?” She blushed, “of course I will."
Chapter 28

Claire came slowly to the surface of consciousness and stretched from fingertips to toes. She topped it off with a renewing yawn as she opened her eyes. “What the hell?” A lovely crystal vase holding twenty-four long stem red roses with babies-breath was on her side table. “Oh! If those aren’t the most beautiful flowers! She looked at the card in Jaime’s handwriting; To my favorite person in the world. Love Jaime.

Claire hurried to get dressed. They had a new group of greenies, and Jag had been resting for the week. It was time to get to work. She walked straight into Jaime’s office and started twisting the blinds closed. She motioned Angus and Rupert to leave. “Gentlemen.” She closed the door and locked it before falling into Jaime’s lap lavishing him with kisses. “The roses are so lovely but it’s not my birthday.”

Jaime smiled, “I’ve been gone a lot this week and I missed ye. That’s what they’re for love.” She kissed him and let her tongue slip into his mouth and dance with his. When she broke away he chased her mouth wanting more, “Sassenach.” She held his face and whispered she had to go. On the way out she told him in sign language, ‘you are my heart.’

Angus called to Claire from the arena. “Hey, Claire! Come look at this big beauty, ha!”

Claire shaded her eyes and walked completely around the gorgeous animal. A gray gelding at least seventeen hands she estimated. “It’s a thoroughbred right?” She lifted a back foot and found no trace of alterations commonly seen in racehorses. “What in the world was this horse used for? Where did the muscular chest, shoulder, and butt come from?”

Angus was clearly enjoying Claire’s incredulous face. “It’s Jaime’s next Jag,” he said.

Claire’s head jerked up in surprise, “honestly? If he is right about this one I will be blown away. Okay Angus, I give up. Where did this gorgeous animal come from?”

Angus could barely contain himself. “The Amish. The laddie’s been pulling a cart for three years!”

The day was full of surprises she thought. First the roses and now him.

By early afternoon, Claire had schooled two greenies and Jag. She felt ready to pass out from the heat and hoped Jaime was alone so she could share the cool air from his window air conditioner.

“This came for ye.” He walked up behind her, “ye got a secret admirer Sassenach?” he breathed into her ear.

She shivered and looked at the tube, opening one end. A couple of firm shakes and a heavy white roll of paper was pulled out of the tube. Claire pulled it open and held it in front of her. Her feet were moving backward until she bumped into the desk. “Holy Christ, it’s the Warmblood, and this is magnificent.”

Jaime read the note that had fallen to the floor. “For you Claire, for your kindness. He lives in my pictures now. This is my favorite. I hope you like it. Love Ruby.”

Claire was stunned. She had captured the horse’s expression like she had a photograph.

Angus came in and whistled. “Why did ye have the Warmblood painted?”
"I didn’t, it’s a gift from a friend. There’s a framer where I get my hair done. I’ll take it today.”

Feeling like she would not faint from the walk up the hill, she blew kisses to the men and left. She had an appointment at the salon.

Later, with her hair in curlers and her fingernails being buffed, she thought about the busy week that had flown by, and all the horses that would demand her attention for the next two months. Once her license was approved by the board, she would no longer have the time to be Jaime’s rider. What then?

Claire soaked in a hot bubble bath and her thoughts went to Sarah Barker and her first three therapy sessions. She was over the moon with the results and planned to do more, much more, to help her patients heal emotionally. The women genuinely liked each other and Claire was very happy Fred and Ginger were under her care. That part of her life has a happy ending she decided.

She stepped out of the tub, relaxed and happy, and almost jumped out of her skin when Jaime walked in. “Jesus, you scared the crap out of me!” He wrapped her up in his arms and kissed her deeply. Then he sat down. “Pretend I’m not here Sassenach. I want to watch you.”

She pulled a big terry robe around her and turned her back to Jaime while she pulled up a tiny new thong and push-up strapless bra. Sitting on the edge of the tub she slowly and carefully pulled up shimmering thigh-high stockings with two inches of lace at the top.

Jaime stared at her breasts when she bent forward to close the straps on her very high heels. His eyes lingered on the shoes before slowly ascending her legs and... The robe landed in his lap snapping him out of his reverie. Twelve inches in front of his face her hips pressed into the vanity and she bent at the waist to apply her make up. If he insisted on taking up space to watch her, she was going to tease him.

Claire applied dark shadow over and under her eyes as they demonstrated at the salon. She brushed on a touch of glimmer and mascara that pulled her lashes into the corners to complete the sultry exotic look. Jaime was stuck looking at her ass and missed the entire application of makeup. Claire set her face with translucent powder and sprayed her cleavage with his favorite Opium perfume.

Jaime stood behind her and she watched him rake over her body. His eyes were dark with desire as he pressed into her butt with a granite erection. Claire put her hands behind her trying to reach for him but he grabbed her hands and pushed them forward to the mirror. Keep yer hands on the mirror lass. Claire opened her mouth to breathe and felt her heart rate soar at the look of him. She heard his low voice, raspy with desire, “I’m gonna touch everything Claire, then you can dress.”

Jaime dropped to his knee and wrapped his hands around her foot and shoe. “Legs apart mo chridhe. Claire was breathing audibly and spread her legs. Jaime’s hands felt up her calf, and lingered on her knee, before ascending her shapely thigh. She felt his fingers cup her ass and slip lower pushing into her fold making her gasp. “God Jaime!” His hand came abruptly up to her bra and pushed it down, making her breasts bounce free. He caressed her breasts and pinched her nipple. Claire was panting and her arms were shaking when she felt him pull her bra into position His warm fingers pulled her breasts into the cups. He straightened her thong and ran his warm hand over her posterior globe.

Claire heard the zipper, and Jaime asking her to step into the dress. He ran the zipper up and kissed her shoulder before he handed her the shawl. “Yer breathtaking love”. They walked to the door and Jaime put his jacket on. Claire felt beautiful and happy and highly aroused.

The last traffic light before the Gainey Ranch resort Jaime pulled her mouth to him and kissed her senseless. We’ll make short work of this party. Then I want to show ye somethin and ask ye a question about it. Claire looked at his smoldering eyes. “what is it?” He stroked her jaw, I dinna ken.
Hope you will when ye see it.”

Claire and Jaime entered the ballroom and their sexual energy was palpable. Men crashed into each other to get to her and female hands in the crook of Jaime’s elbow pulled him from one group of females to another. They wanted to say hello and have a moment just look at him up close. Jaime and Claire were both gracious but wanted to break away and hold each other. Claire was surrounded by men smiling and nodding when she felt his arm around her waist. He pointed up at the ceiling where there was a tunnel that spanned one end of the ballroom to the other. The top half of the tunnel had a total glass exposure to the city lights and the night sky. The lower half that was visible to those in the ballroom was legs and feet of guests walking the tube. “Can I show ye the best view of the city and sky?” She looked up at his face and felt her heart squeeze like it always did. Jaime pulled her out of the ballroom.

Several pockets of young girls with blonde hair, perfect teeth, and enhanced breasts had pestered Jaime looking for a chance to look in his eyes and pretend it was them he adored. They watched the couple leave the ballroom and hearts fell all around the room.

When the elevator doors closed it was suddenly quiet and Claire put her arms around Jaime hoping they could find a dark corner and kiss the breath out of each other. Claire smiled sincerely at the elevator operator. They walked to the entrance of the tube and Jaime was patting his pockets. Wait right here Sassenach. I dropped our claim ticket in the elevator. When he came back he took Claire’s hand and led her into the tube.

Claire was so enamored with the view she kept turning in circles and looking everywhere. Seeing pretty legs in sexy stiletto’s moving down the tube caught the attention of many men at the party.

“It is a stunning view Jaime!” He stopped and pulled her to him. The voyeurs downstairs saw pretty legs stand between masculine trousers, very close. Anyone watching knew she was locked in a kiss and they could not pull their eyes away.

“Sassenach” he whispered touching her face, never more sure in his life of his next move. “This is what I wanted to show ye.” Jaime dropped to one knee and looked into the bewildered eyes of his dearest love.

Women were nudging each other and pointing at the tube. When a man is down on one knee and pretty legs are pointed in his direction it could only mean one thing. He was proposing, and those watching were spellbound. The older guests were transported through their memories when they had this experience. The young looked up with hope. As more and more people became aware of a young man’s heart being given to pretty legs a hush fell over the crowd and many eyes were lifted to the scene playing out above them.

Claire looked at the little box in Jaime’s hand which seemed to open in slow motion. The exquisite, two carrot, round diamond caught the light, and she heard Jaime ask her to marry him.

“I believe in the sanctity of marriage and I’m ready to pledge myself to ye for eternity. I promise to protect ye, and never forget that ye have your own dreams to chase, I’ll help ye, and always be grateful when ye help me chase mine. I have never been more sure of anything in my life Claire.”

Claire finally got it, and with tears streaming down her face she said yes and bent her knees to pull him to her mouth. The knee was still bent and a hand was extended.

“Oh God, she said no.” People watching from the ballroom were guessing. “I bet a paycheck that is Jaime Fraser, same color suit and those are the shoes she was wearing. She can’t say no to the most eligible bachelor in Phoenix!” Someone said.
A feminine hand dropped into his and he slipped the ring on her finger. The man stood up and Pretty legs jumped towards him. Her stilettos left the floor as he pulled her to him. There was a collective “awe” and people went back to their conversations about the school board, horse shows, and other mundane aspects of their lives.

One man continued to watch quietly. He smiled when Jaime put the ring on her hand. That was the only reason Dougal McKenzie attended the party tonight.

Jaime was the bigger man when he showed up at Dougal’s office on Tuesday. Dougal didn’t make it easy for him but he listened and asked questions until every horrific detail was disclosed. Jaime was not there to talk about Laoghaire but he answered Dougal’s questions honestly. Dougal’s icy attitude warmed up a bit and he offered a parent’s apology.

When Jaime explained he wanted to get married but had to put his financial affairs in order first, Dougal asked why. “I canna tie the Sassenach to a sinking ship. If ye call your note I’ll be forced to sell the property to pay ye.” He passed his ledger book to Dougal, and with raised eyebrows, Dougal looked at every page. His liabilities were neatly listed and amortized by hand. Expenses for grain, hay, tack, electricity, utilities, insurance, wood shavings, vet expenses, and building maintenance were recorded every month going back almost three years. His various sources of income were listed and recorded monthly. Dougal figured he could maybe break-even certain months but he saw no gain to speak of.

Dougal looked at Jaime dubiously. The income isn’t there Jaime. I saw maybe two or three months where income would cover expenses so how are you keeping the lights on? Jaime stood up to look at the page he was on and smiled. “Well, there’s more.”

Dougal turned the page and another and another and felt his world tilt. Each page was a different horse, with statistics, purchase price, costs for training, food, and board, show entry fees, vetting, and the selling price. Dates of ownership were listed and investors, their percentages, check numbers and amounts for their return on investment. Investor names were replaced with numbers and every dime in or out for that horse was fastidiously recorded. Dougal studied the numbers and shook his head several times.

“How do you make this kind of money so consistently selling these horses?” Jaime smiled, “with a four-man, ah, person team. We all excel at different things. I brought my two best friends from Scotland, one does the foundation training, the other manages the business, and I pick the horses to buy and recruit investors. All of us are invested in each horse and we all want to make money.”

Dougal looked up at Jaime. “That’s only three people.”

Jaime seemed uncomfortable suddenly. “The rider is the fourth member of the team and probably the most important for making the best money on a horse. A skilled rider can make a plow horse look like an Olympian. Turn-over time goes down and the selling price goes up commensurate with the rider’s skill. The team is the best it’s ever been right now.”

Jaime’s sole purpose for this trip was to bury the hatchet with Dougal and verify if he was standing on a rock or a melting iceberg. His stomach butterflies had turned into sharks waiting for Dougal’s answer.

“Tell me about your girl.” As Jaime described Claire, his love for her was obvious and it warmed Dougal’s heart that he found someone to share his life with. “Have ye bought a ring yet?”

Jaime looked at Dougal wearily. “I dinna ken there’s a need yet.”
Dougal sat back in his massive chair. “Let’s discuss the elephant in the room, hmm? I see Laoghaire running to me, blonde ringlets bouncing, her wee face smiling with excitement. When I catch her she puts her hands on my face and speaks to me. If I hold her hands, she canna speak. I ken I shoulda sent her to Scotland to live on my cousin’s farm when I first saw her changin. I couldna do it. That was my biggest mistake.” Dougal exhaled a long breath. “I won’t be calling your note Jaime.”

When Dougal made his last statement, the burr and Highland dialect were gone. Intentional or not, Jaime saw his broken heart and it took hours to shake the sadness he felt for the man.

Dougal called later that day and told Jaime to come to his office at eleven o’clock tomorrow.

Jaime couldn’t miss the hired muscle in the reception area when the secretary waved him in. A Russian man was conversing with Dougal, looking at diamonds through an eye loop. Jaime’s eyes were huge when he looked at all the diamonds scattered on a black velvet square. He listened and learned about how the stones were graded and how they were priced. The Russian put two round cut diamonds side by side. They were the same cut and carrot but graded differently.

Jaime was shocked to see the brilliance of the higher grade compared to the dull yellow of the lower. “She is a diamond on a bed of river rocks.” He pointed to the high-grade diamond and the two other men chuckled at his open-hearted admission.

As a favor to Dougal, the man was selling at the import price which was roughly thirty percent of retail diamonds. Jaime purchased the biggest and best quality stone he could afford and Claire would wear a wedding ring insured for thirty thousand dollars. If she said yes.

All three men weighed in on the setting and Jaime made his choice. Simple, elegant, and just like his Sassenach. He couldn’t wait to show her.

The Russian, Vladimir, said he would bring the ring to Jaime on Friday and Jaime left to get back to the barn. He smiled until his cheeks hurt on the way home. That is when the tunnel at the Gainey Ranch popped into his head. They were stuck going to this affair and would be dressed to the nine’s. He would propose when she was feeling beautiful. It was perfect. He planned to fill his pockets with fifty-dollar bills so he could bribe, or buy, some privacy in the tube.

Back In the present, Jaime kissed his bride-to-be and felt his life snap into place. Finally.

Claire thought she might burst with happiness. She looked up at this beautiful man and felt like the 10 she was for the first time. Those who still watched the lovers saw her pull his large hand to her ample rump. Pretty legs fell in step with the proposer and they walked out of the tube. It took thirty seconds for the tube to fill with legs, and watchers had nothing more to see.

Jaime and Claire walked out of the tube to a small crowd clapping and congratulating. The elevator operators held the people back giving Jaime time to propose. An agreement struck when he went back to look for something that was never there in the first place.

Claire kissed Jaime down the elevator and was shocked and bewildered when the doors opened to people congratulating them both and women holding her hand to look at the ring. Jaime was speechless at the number of well-wishers and wondered how they could know. He was pulling Claire’s hand toward the door and they finally broke free into the quiet night.

They were both silent until Jaime turned up Ironwood and slammed on his brakes. He pulled Claire into his arms and kissed her breathless. “Thank you Sassenach. I will be everything you need, everything you want, and everything you deserve. With his forehead pressed to hers he whispered, “I promise.”
As May rolled into June, a sweet peace had settled around Claire and Jamie. On cool mornings, Jaime would forego his ride and they would walk into one of the mountain trails with Pup. It was no longer the frenetic pace of the winter months and the team adopted a siesta schedule. On a horse at five in the morning, interior arena after ten, home or pool early afternoon, back on a horse by nine o’clock in the evening. The team was grumpy, the horses were sleepy, and Jaime was miserable having three adults crowd into his office all day, blocking the cool air from the air conditioner. Rather than explode, he reminded himself of what true misery was.

Jamie’s decision to make Arizona his home was based primarily on supply and demand for quality horses. He didn’t want to struggle against the established trainers in the East with long track records of success. He would forever be a minnow in a sea of sharks, something his disdain for mediocrity could not abide. He never anticipated the relentless sun that scorched every blade of grass and the flesh on his body.

The first summer almost beat him back to Scotland, but everything he had was invested in his barn. He refused to give up. He rented a room nearby and purchased a small air conditioner for the one enclosed room in the barn where he had been sleeping. Many nights he laid in his rented bed and remembered his life as a competitor. It was hard to believe that one year ago his biggest decision was which private jet to get on. Now, at twenty-six years of age, he had saddled himself with the impossible.

By mid-June, he declared this place a living hell and decided it couldn’t get any worse, just before it did. Many of the boarders moved out and took their horses up north for three months to escape the heat. His income plummeted. He was alone, the only rider, the only trainer, and completely broke when September offered the first hint of relief.

As the boarders came back, there was enough money to hire a rider and sell the two horses that were ready. His rider, John Gray, was a British student starting his Master’s curriculum at the University. Jaime decided a male was a safer alternative for a lonely, celibate Scot, and they bonded in a friendship he attributes to saving his business and his sanity.

With the sale of his first two horses, he rolled the money into four more with a goal of selling them in two months. John would spend two afternoons per week riding all four of the greenies allowing Jaime to study their gates and other performance markers from the ground. He could only pay John for showing but he continued to donate his time anyway.

With the first taste of success, Jaime worked tirelessly on capital improvements, including a house so he could move out of the barn. He knew in his bones that he could make a living selling horses and transform his property into a high-end facility with top riders. Despite his tireless efforts and John’s skill, the income was spent before it was made. Jaime was forced to admit that even in prime winter months he was sinking. He needed to borrow some money.

Jaime filled out numerous applications for bank loans but his collateral, the barn, was too dependent on market fluctuation to be of interest to anyone. He continued to search for money because it was the only thing he could do. When he walked into Dougal McKenzie’s office and discovered a fellow Scot behind the desk he wanted to hug him.

Dougal listened, and against his better judgment, agreed to loan Jaime the full amount of his equity in the property. When the note was drawn up, Jaime was shocked to see the interest he agreed to was reduced a full two points. He pumped Dougal’s hand in thanks and his face was beaming. Dougal
seemed gruff on the outside but his heart was swelling by his kind act toward the twenty-six-year-old Scot. Life changed after that.

Jaime’s first concern each month was making his loan payment to Dougal even if he missed an important horse show or ate beans for a week. Once paid, he turned his full attention to training, showing, and selling horses. There were times he was curious about John’s devotion to him but as the money came flowing in he pushed the issue away. When the second summer came John went home for two months and Jaime spent every spare minute finishing his house. He made enough money to see him through the scorching three months and decided against buying more greenies until the fall.

The night before final inspection on the house Jaime walked outside and looked down at his barn sitting in the dirt, and the rusty round pen set up on the dirt. He looked far beyond the two modest structures to where the neon markers stood to delineate his property. In his mind, he saw green pastures, a large arena full of jumps, tall poles that held bright lights for night riding, fresh paint, bright white with forest green trim, on the barn. He needed help. He needed his mates, and he would do anything to get them here.

Rupert and Angus were still in the Highlands scratching out a living and drinking on the weekends. In the bars, they talked about Jaime like he was a superstar, taken from their homeland to pursue fortune and glory. They both kept every equine magazine that featured Jaime on the cover and they were first to Lallybroch to welcome him home. Jaime had not been home for Hogmanay for two years and each of them secretly worried he abandoned them.

Jaime created the most lucrative salary he could possibly meet. It would require a steady supply of green horses throughout the year and he would max out his earning potential. Angus had a gift for breaking down the movements for a green horse. He made some money doing it in Scotland but there was little demand. Rupert had a head for operations and managed a local warehouse with numerous supply chains for businesses. Their skills would help the business grow and provide two more strong men to complete the transformation of the property. All he had to do is keep them sober.

Rupert was overjoyed hearing from Jaime. He listened to Jaime’s explanation of his business and before Jaime could bring up the job Rupert asked if he needed any help. “Hang on Rupert, ye dinna ken what I can pay ye” There was a short pause, “do ye have any beer?” Jaime’s call to Angus was much the same.

Angus and Rupert proved to be two glutinous sacks of pure gold to Jamie’s project. True to form they worked tirelessly for five days and stayed drunk all weekend. When John came back Jaime would find Angus in the newly built arena shouting changes to John, and Rupert bent over his inventory clipboard in the feed room. Other than calling John a dandy behind his back, Jaime was thrilled with his team and the progress they had made.

When fresh green grass was pushing up from the dirt the property was transformed into the desert oasis Jaime had imagined. As he turned a complete circle, marveling at all they had accomplished, a Mustang pulled up behind him and a gorgeous blond got out and smiled at him. “My father sent me to speak with you. My name is Laoghaire McKenzie”
Jaime felt Claire’s legs wrap around him from behind and she offered a loaded cracker. “Ah, some girl has put her legs around me middle Pup. That’s a Scottish invitation, so I have’ta go to a party now.” He reached down and tickled her foot. When Claire jerked her foot away Jaime spun around and held her to his chest as he moved them through the water. His kisses were soft and caring and Claire ran her tongue across his bottom lip. “Let me have your tongue mo chridhe.” His hand ran down her back as he sucked her tongue into his mouth. When his hand came around her naked butt he lifted her onto the cool deck and gently pressed her onto her back.

Claire felt Jaime’s warm tongue on her cold skin. It sent shivers up her spine and she moaned. Jaime pressed her legs further apart as his arousal shot into the heavens. He held her pelvis to his mouth and his tongue danced across her, into her, alternating between a gentle suck and a merciless flick. Claire arched her back and panted his name. “Jesus Jaime, make me come, please.” Jaime grabbed her nipple and shook her breast hard before pushing her into the realm of pure sensation.

He placed kisses an inch apart up to her mouth. When she opened her eyes, he lifted her back into the pool and cuddled her. “I want ye Sassenach” was growled into her ear. “Take my place,” she said in between deep kissed.

Jamie laid back on the warm cool deck and felt Claire’s mouth around his balls, sucking and licking, he feared he would combust spontaneously and he moaned for more. Claire’s cold hand wrapped around his tip making him jump and pant. When she took him into her mouth the temperature difference was another jolt to his arousal. He gripped her hair and pulled her down on his cock. When he released her, he raised up on his elbows and watched the erotic scene playing out. He was close and pushed his hips up jamming his erection against the back of her throat. Jaime knew how aroused she became when he let her do this so before he came, he pulled her away.

Jaime grabbed a huge beach towel and spread it on the astroturf. He asked Claire to lie down on her side and then laid down beside her, head to feet. He wasn’t gentle pushing her mouth back to her task and rolled to his back pulling her pelvis to his mouth where his tongue thrust into her. Claire’s scream was muffled by her full mouth or they would have heard it at the barn. She opened her mouth for gulps of air before his thrusting hips closed it again. Her wee noises were at a fevered pitch and just before his orgasm, Jaime flicked her into her own release. Claire swallowed over and over as her body jerked.

Jaime’s hot hands scooped her up and they entered the cool water again for soft kissing in a post-orgasm embrace.

Jaime and Claire retreated to the cool interior of the house. He pulled Claire’s naked body down onto the bearskin rug and locked her into his embrace where they could sleep the hot afternoon away.

Claire felt intoxicated by this new manner of lovemaking. She replayed it in her mind and felt her arousal heating up. She forced her mind to empty and was soon breathing deeply like Jaime.

Claire’s fuzzy mind became aware of her arousal and breathed out forcefully in a gasp. Jaime had her body locked into a spoon and his warm fingers were invading her while the other arm came across her chest to hold her to him. She could not move and his heavy breathing directly into ear was making her crazy. He growled, “fight me if you want Sassenach. I willna let you go until I have my way with ye.” She felt him enter from behind and pushed his tip in and out before ramming the length of him into her. “God Sassenach!” Claire was so turned on by the sounds and words flowing into her ears she tried to wiggle away and change positions. One that might provide the friction her body craved. “Ye canna get away from me, mo chridhe.” Jaime rammed into her until she was begging and breathless.” Jaime lifted her leg over his hip and behind him exposing her throbbing. His fingers provided the friction she needed and she
moaned into a very prolonged orgasm while he rammed her. He couldn’t wait for her return and pulled her leg up with one hand, opening her to his thrusting. The other hand clamped down on her shoulder, pinning her in place. Claire was completely immobilized and at the mercy of the neanderthal who pounded into her and released with a great shudder. “Oh my God,” she whispered.

Jaime released her shoulder and leg and wrapped himself around her. “I’m sorry, mo chridhe” he said, pressed into her hair. “Are ye okay lass? I dinna mean to…” She could feel his body contract, as if in shame? “Jaime,” trying to catch her breath, “you are the sexiest man alive. I’m sure of it.” She felt him relax with a deep breath of exoneration. They kissed and dozed until Jaime’s cell phone announced it was time to get on a horse.
Chapter 30

Sarah Barker continued her therapy sessions with Fred and Ginger. Patients came morning and night to stroke, hug and ride the horses. Whenever possible she and Claire would retreat to Claire’s house and swim or have lunch, and talk about every single thing on earth. They were very close and both placed a high value on the friendship.

When Sarah’s lease was up at her Phoenix loft she asked Claire where to look in the East Valley. She wanted to be closer since she was here every day. She spent a month looking and one day threw up her hands, completely exhausted from looking at properties. “I can’t do this anymore, and neither can you Claire. I’ll just renew my lease in the city.” Disappointed but resigned, Sarah looked forward to another year of commuting.

Claire put her time in driving neighborhoods looking for rental signs which were impossible to find. The far East Valley went from shanties to mansions with no apparent delineation, and the twisting dirt roads made it impossible to scan a block for signs. Claire never realized how lucky she was to find her house planted minutes from the center. The light bulb lit up in her head and she smiled.

In Palm Desert, young Ruby warmed up a stable horse for an expensive clinic that was about to start. She had saved for this and then they put her on a fifteen-year-old mare that just wanted to rest. Ruby was fuming because she would get little out of this jumping clinic. She saved every penny so she could take clinics like this. Several times a year she would spend, what was to her, a king’s ransom to improve her skill. This was the second time she was given an under-performing horse and the money was wasted. She struggled with tears of frustration and forced them down.

Ruby and Claire communicated by email, Skype, or phone, nearly every week. Claire offered suggestions based on Ruby’s explanations but in her heart, she knew Ruby was fighting a losing battle. If she could not find decent horses to ride she would not improve as a rider.

Claire told Ruby she would be perfect riding for an eventing barn but she needed more than walk, trot, and canter lessons. Ruby agreed to start looking but felt discouraged before she even started.

Later that day, after a miserable clinic, Ruby called Claire in tears. Claire’s muscles tensed at the unfairness of the barn that sponsored the clinic.

“Ruby, do you ever get two days off in a row, or can you arrange it?” Ruby explained her hours were cut back in the summer and two days in a row was easy.

“I will pay for your gas and lend you my house if you can get here. Quick as possible. I’ll bet you are better in the heat than any of us and we have four horses to get ready for show. It’s perfect!” Claire waited for Ruby to respond but heard nothing but air. Then the scream came forcing Claire to hold the phone at arm's length for two minutes. She thought Ruby was screaming words but she couldn’t understand them. She did hear “Thank you! Bye.” Claire wondered when to expect her.

Claire skipped the nap that afternoon to grocery shop and cook Jaime’s favorite meal with his favorite side dishes and dessert. It was time for them to have the conversation about her going back to work and she felt miserable about it. She felt like she was abandoning Jaime. She still wanted to show the prospects on the weekends but her days would be spent elsewhere. The letter from the Medical Board arrived the day before announcing her application was in the final review. She was so relieved but the melancholy settled in as the day progressed. She was going to tell him tonight as well as announce Ruby was coming.
Jaime followed his nose out of bed and down the stairs. He saw a plate of fresh bannocks, a pot of Scottish Hotch-Potch boiling on the stove, a bubbling beef roast in the oven, and wrapped crowdie and Caboc cheese. Two things were missing, whiskey and the love of his life. Jaime sat on a kitchen stool and smelled the aromas of home with his eyes closed.

Claire looked at his handsome face and couldn’t miss the happiness he felt with the familiar aromas. His hand found her bare thigh and he moaned for her. “You must open your eyes and take this whiskey.”

“I canna, I’m at Lallybroch at the moment.” His other hand came forward to find her other thigh, also bare. “Are ye naked then Sassenach?”

Claire giggled and kissed his eyelids, “your eyes are too beautiful to hide them from me. I insist.” She kissed him softly over and over and he finally opened his gorgeous, happy eyes. Claire filled a large bowl with Hotch-Potch and set in on a plate with pieces of beef roast. The bannocks and cheese were set on the table and a bowl of Colcannon.

Jaime watched her bring his favorite dishes and knew they could only be made from scratch requiring most of her afternoon. He narrowed his eyes at her but they dropped to her butt and lingered. When this beautiful girl was in sight, he had no control.

They ate in silence and Jaime savored the tastes of his Scotland home. As his stomach filled he wondered what prompted this awesome surprise. It didn’t take long before he figured it out. He struggled to push down his disappointment, not wanting to add to any remorse she might be feeling. Even though Jaime promised not to guess her mind anymore, it was painfully obvious.

“So yer leavin me Sassenach, it’s time to be a doctor again, is it not?” He didn’t mean it to sound so harsh and he smiled at her just before she dissolved in tears. Jaime pushed away from the table and held his hand out to her. She straddled him and buried her face in his neck, sobs unabated.

Jaime heard her heartbreak and ran his hand up and down her back speaking softly in Gallic. First, he said the prayer for strength and gratitude, then he told her every way she had helped him in time of need, and how proud he was of her. She did not know what the words meant but found them comforting just the same.

“I’m so grateful, ye ken? For yer willingness to help and yer skill. It has been this lad’s honor and pleasure every minute workin with ye. It’s time for me to give ye back to the world, I ken. Don’t cry lass, we will still be together. It’s naught but a minor adjustment.” He hugged her tight and knew how much she would be missed. “So, Sassenach, how much time do I have?” Jaime’s answer would require her sobbing to stop and that would take some time.

For some reason, he couldn’t go back to the barn tonight and watch her argue with Angus in their sibling-like language about her changes, or form, or speed, or one hundred other things he wanted to pick on her about. He couldn’t watch her eye-roll dismissal of Rupert’s question that was beneath a fourth grader. Rupert’s way of interacting with someone he loves. Nor could he listen to the three of them laugh and fight for the best spot in front of the air conditioner. God, they would all miss her so much. He didn’t want to even look at the barn until he had a night to adjust. They curled up on the study sofa and watched an old Western with John Wayne. Jaime knew she continued to struggle because the tears started again about every half hour or so.

Jaime wrapped her in his arms when the last light was turned off for the night. When sleep was close he felt her turn around and hold his face. She kissed him with a need for closeness, physical contact, and forgiveness. Without foreplay, and without the high energy chase they usually ran, he entered her body slowly and with the light of a full moon, locked his eyes on hers. The emotion in both of
their eyes expressed gratitude, fine memories, and acceptance.

Later, when Claire snuggled into Jaime’s side he looked into her mind to gauge the hurdle in front of her. She would feel guilty about abandoning him, and however erroneous that was, it would torture her. Next, she would feel a crippling loss of her place on the team, her family. My God Sassenach, he thought, how can this not break yer heart? I’ll help ye lass. I stand by my vow to protect yer dreams and yer heart. Yer a lifetime member of this family and ye’ll ken by this time tomorrow. You are the magic that makes our team great and I’ll hold ye to yer agreement to show for me on the weekends. We just need someone to get the horses ready for ye. A “new rider” will be stricken from our vocabulary. We already have a rider. She’s a doctor. But on the weekends she is his fierce Sassenach and that won’t change.

Twice during the night, Jaime felt her body shaking with tears she was trying to quiet. Her pain broke his heart and he pulled her into a warm cocoon and whispered his love to her until she was breathing deeply again.

Claire moped through her morning ride. Trying to be funny and normal just made it worse for her and more confusing to the guys. She didn’t pile into the office for relief from the heat and Jaime looked up at his two confused friends.

“The lass is goin back to work, her medical license came through. She needs us to remind her she is still a member of this team. She is conflicted and hurting so please do yer best to make her ken that.”

Rupert handed her the next horse and her phone that buzzed continuously for twenty minutes. Claire hit the call button and heard Ruby’s excited voice. “I’ll be there by five or six at the latest!”

Claire’s head jerked up. “Rupert, take the horse, I have a situation and need to find Jaime. Sorry.”

Claire filled Jaime in on Ruby’s situation, where she lived in Palm Desert and her unfailing love for eventing. “I watched her ride the Warmblood at the show after my dressage test. She needs quality instruction on a quality horse. She could be your next rider.”

Jaime looked up at his sweet love. “I already have a rider. Can she get the horses ready for ye? We might be bitin off more than we can chew if the lass needs too much training, or worse, has no talent.”

“I have not mentioned anything about her riding for us. I only invited for two days to help us school these horses. She has grown up in Palm Desert where it’s even hotter than here, and doesn’t require a siesta.”

“Ye did good Sassenach! Two days ye say. Number 72 is gonna sell as a hunter-jumper next week I think. Would that be a good place to start?”

“You do realize that none of us understand your numbering system, right?” Jaime kissed her sweety, “it’s my only advantage over the rest of ye Sassenach.”

“I know I’m asking a lot, but can you and Angus assess her skill level tonight? We need to know how good she is and how long until she is ready for the field. I’m still your eventer Jaime but she will be the one getting them ready, that means going to the course in Gilbert. I don’t want to break her heart so it has to be on the down low initially. Okay? I need to make a quick call, be right back.”

Claire knew Sarah was coming tonight to work with Fred and Ginger and she needed a favor. Thrilled to catch Sarah between patients, Claire filled her in on Ruby’s background, her work ethic, and Claire’s hope to help her. “She is a good girl and very young. I’m afraid she will be scared in my
house alone so I want you to stay here with her. Why drive back to the city and turn around and come right back in the morning?” Claire pushed her luck, “and then tomorrow night too.”

“Sarah laughed at Claire, knowing her friend had all her fingers and toes crossed waiting for an answer. “Of course Claire, it would be a pleasure to stay a couple days in the coolest house I have ever seen. What kind of provisions are there? Never mind, I will stop on my way tonight and pick some stuff up for a girls weekend.” Claire was overwhelmed with gratitude.

Claire found Jaime staring intensely at a large drawing or schematic. She recognized the barn but couldn’t quite figure out the addition he was considering.

“I’m done for now, care to cool off in the pool?” She slid her hands down his chest from behind and whispered in his ear, “I have a special gift for you if you come with me.”

Jaime quickly lost interest in his drawing and pulled her out the door of his office. Halfway down the driveway, he whistled for Pup. It was one-hundred and eleven parched degrees and nothing ever felt so good as the cool water.

After making love and napping, Claire and Jaime walked back to the barn at five o’clock that evening. Rupert was to watch for Ruby and then greet her. He was bent over his papers and pounding the calculator when they walked in.

Rupert looked up a bit bewildered but remembered some friend of Claire’s coming tonight. Jaime was handing him a tape measure, pencil, and clipboard. “I need yer help with measurements if ye can stay a couple more minutes.” Rupert bounded out the door after Jaime.”

Claire called to check on Ruby’s progress and discovered she had missed the exit on Ironwood and turned around in Globe Arizona, heading back. Perfect. Claire went to get the big bay hunter brushed and ready for tack. Jaime and Rupert walked past the stall arguing about the size needed for his whateveritwas. Claire pressed her face to the gelding’s, “be good for Ruby. She needs you.”

Claire sat down in Jaime’s office and Rupert vaporized. “Well, what is the fuss about she asked smiling. What amazing thing are you creating?”

Rupert opened his truck door to go home and heard tires come up the white rocks. He looked at the driver and decided she was the most beautiful lass he had ever seen.

“Excuse me,” when she smiled Rupert nearly fainted. Deep dimples appeared at the sides of her perfect white teeth. He noticed she wore no make-up and was so pretty without it. “I am meeting Claire here but I don’t know where to park.”

Rupert was staring at her and bouncing like he did when happy. “Lines.” He looked at her questioning face. “I havena painted the lines yet, so ye can park anywhere ye want.”

Claire looked up at Rupert’s weird smile as he sat down. His face reminded her of very stoned students she would pass on campus. He looked at her and said “Claire,” still smiling.

“What’s happened to ye laddie?” Jaime was trying to control his laughter.

Rupert looked at both of them, still smiling. “Ruby.”

Claire got up and looked close at Rupert. “Uh-Oh.” She went to find Ruby.

Jaime leaned back in his chair and stuck a pencil between his teeth as he regarded Rupert. “So laddie, how long do these stupers usually last?”
Claire walked Ruby around the center. It was six o’clock in the evening, still scorching hot and they had three more hours of sunlight to endure. When Angus pulled up he introduced himself.

“Nice to meet ye Ruby. I’ll be given ye lesson whenever yer ready.”

Ruby’s eyes were huge and she turned to Claire at an utter loss for words. Claire motioned Angus to leave and asked, “what is it Ruby?”

“I can’t buy a lesson tonight. I don’t have any money! I am so embarrassed. Did he come here just for that.?”

Claire assured her the lesson was free and Angus was on the team. “Let me put your mind at ease Ruby. You pay for nothing for the next two days. Just ride. When one horse is done, Rupert will hand you another until you say UNCLE. Okay?

“I will never say UNCLE.”

“I figured as much,” Claire said through giggles. “Come and meet Jaime and we’ll get you on a horse.”

Ruby looked like she would faint and her head whipped to the sign at the start of the driveway. “Jaime Fraser!” It sounded like a screamed whisper.

Claire encouraged Ruby to relax. “Jaime is just a regular guy.” Ruby looked at her like she daft and when Jaime’s huge frame got up to shake her hand the color drained from her face and she looked ready for the grim reaper. Jaime looked alarmed at Claire as she pulled Ruby out of the office.

“Hey Ruby, your housemate is here, come and meet her.” Introductions were made and the three women chatted while Rupert tacked up her horse.

“Here ye go lass,” Rupert’s face was tomato red as he handed her the horse. “I’ll show ye the way.”

Claire helped with stirrups and a leg up. The horse was almost eighteen hands and even for someone as tall as Ruby, the mount was difficult. Claire asked her to relax and warm him up.

She stood next to Angus and watched her perfectly still leg at trot and canter and her deep seat for the extended trot. “She’s got a quiet seat. So far, Angus was tight-lipped.

He called her into the center arena. “Show me a dressage seat. Okay. Where is foot when askin for a flyin lead change? Okay, that’s right. Show me a jumpin seat on the flat. Okay. Where’s ye hands and seat for cross country?” He waited.

“I don’t know yet. You are going to show me I hope.” Angus shot Claire a look she didn’t understand. “Go out to the rail lass.”

Claire looked Angus with pleading eyes, “assess her baseline and tell me if she can take my place in a month, Angus, please. I really want to mentor Ruby but not if she will hold Jaime back, and by Jaime I mean us, the team.”

Angus gave Claire a rare smile, “Jaime’s always yer first concern, is he not. Yer goin back to yer doctorin and yer worit about Jaime. Dinna fash lass, I’ll let ye know. Let’s get Jaime watching her as well.”

Claire looked around, “I don’t see any place he can hide. If she sees him she will likely faint and fall out of the saddle.” Angus looked confused. Claire laughed at his expression. “This is the worst case
of hero worship I have ever seen. She’ll come around, but she is a little overwhelmed tonight. Yep, she’ll take a dive.”

Claire looked for Ruby and raised her hand to halt. “Initiation by fire little girl, don’t choke,” she murmured. Claire walked to the rail and stopped Ruby’s warm up. Claire fiddled with her stirrups and then looked at her. “How bad do you want this Ruby? This is your chance to prove you are ready. Relax, face forward. Imagine your in a dressage test and the judges are in the middle arena, if you look at them, you failed. Understand? Eyes forward and listen for Angus to call your changes.”

Ruby didn’t look down, she nodded her agreement. Suddenly she saw the full canvas of this trip and it was so much bigger than she ever imagined. This was not the proverbial taking a poor kid and showing them the amazing life they would never have. This was the audition of her lifetime and dear Claire just plugged her into that reality.

Claire walked into Jaime’s office and dropped into his lap kissing him deeply. “Ruby will not look to the center ring. You are safe to stand with Angus and watch her. Jaime looked like he was not in the mood to indulge this girl. “As a rider, this is the turning point in the life she believes she wants. I need you to tell me if she’s worth the risk. Please love.” Once he nodded she yanked him toward the arena and peeked around the entrance to find Ruby barreling up on them. Claire pushed back against Jaime and he wrapped around her. She broke the kiss and pushed him into the arena.

Claire thought about watching but she was too close to the players to be objective. This barn was Jaime’s baby and he would determine what chances to take. She walked into the night air, a bit cooler now, and went looking for Sarah.

Claire could see Sarah, Fred, and a young man about twenty yrs old in a wheelchair. Sarah coaxed him to stand up and pushed his hand against Fred’s neck. The patient was terrified and his whole body shook. Sarah was patient and encouraging, nudging slowly closer to Fred. There was another woman there Claire thought to be his mother and she encouraged him also.

The young man tried to sit in his chair several times but Sarah would not let him. It was starting to feel weird to Claire, like torture. She wanted to make it stop and help him. Sarah never let up and the man moved toward Fred about an inch in five minutes. Another inch, and another inch. When the man’s body made contact with Fred’s chest, he was so scared his shaking became quaking from head to toe. ‘C’mom Fred, Claire thought, help him. Fred swung his head around and gently nudged the man into his chest. The man’s eyes were squeezed shut with terror. The mother lost control and walked briskly away.

Claire decided to stop this harassment and opened her mouth when she heard the man gasp. Sarah was smiling and looked shocked when there was another sound. He was taking gulps of air and making sounds with his broken and rusty voice.

His arms came up around Fred’s neck and the man cried. Claire watched his crying deepen into convulsive, and heart wrenching sobs, with Fred nudging him back continuously.

Claire watched Sarah talk softly, and place the man’s hand back on Fred's neck. The patient cried so long that Claire was sobbing herself. She felt his terror and somehow she felt him release it.

Claire ran to the far edges of the property and sat behind a tree. When her tears stopped she wrapped her arms around her waist and imagined she was holding the man and giving her strength.

“Claire?” Her eyes flew open and she jumped up. Sarah’s arms came around her and hugged her tight. “It’s emotional, the work I do. That boy has been home from Afganistan for eight months and this is the first noise he’s made.” Sarah looked out into the green pasture and took a few deep
breaths. “What kind of horror makes a nineteen-year-old boy stop talking, and walking, for eight months? Fred doesn’t care, or even want to know. His love and support is unconditional and offered to all, healthy or sick.”

Sarah looked at her visibly shaken friend and smiled. “A Breakthrough like tonight might happen once a year. But when it does, it’s like watching the hand of God.”

Claire’s voice was tentative like she was unsure if she really wanted to know the answer to her next question. “What happened to him?”

“Three days as a captive behind rebel lines. Whatever happened to this boy rocked him so deeply, he disconnected. The American forces pushed back on the rebels and discovered him tied to a chair with a black bag over his head. It’s the severe side of battlefield PTSD.” She rubbed her friend’s arm. “Fred didn’t give up on Brandon as I suspect other’s did. Do you see now, why I want to make this my life’s work Claire? What made you cry so hard?”

“I felt his pain, so deep, and then I heard him cry and wanted the torment to stop. It was like watching someone be tortured. How could you let him suffer so long?”

Sarah smiled and looked at Claire with so much compassion. “Fred stood his ground and refused to walk away without Brandon. It took some time for Brandon to know Fred wouldn’t leave him behind. He made a decision to connect with Fred, I believe. Fred is big enough and strong enough to protect Brandon. I hope in future sessions Brandon will give his trauma to Fred. It’s a start, our first miracle in his recovery. Are you all right?”

Claire giggled, “I’m getting there.”
Chapter 31

Claire paced up and down the main aisle with one ear on Angus and peaking at Ruby now and then. Angus gave her a course of seven jumps while she was still on the big chestnut bay. He said “good” a lot, each time Claire would jump up and down. Ruby was on the third horse and had yet to stop and drink anything. Claire needed to intervene before she passed out.

Claire looked at Rupert who still looked stoned and then turned to Angus. “I’m calling it for tonight. Surely you’ve seen enough for a baseline. She motioned Ruby to the center and overheard the guys behind her, two feet behind her.

Angus hit Rupert’s arm grinning. “Only seen one other person can ride that long and be ready for more, ha!”

Rupert thought for a minute, “who?”

“Claire, ye idiot!”

“Well, I dinna ken who ye ken.”

Claire spun and looked at them like she could turn them to stone. “I am right here, you idiots.”

Rupert looked insulted. “I ken yer there lass, I see ye, so dinna call me a idiot.” He asked Angus, “why does she count like that, the lass will no go past ten.”

“Ruby!” Give me your crop please. She heard Rupert’s “uh-oh.” He had a ten-foot lead but she chased him out of the arena with the crop poised above her head. Jaime’s arm came around her and lifted her off her feet. Her cheeks were red with the effort and she was gulping air from laughing.

Jaime calmly asked, “feel better then?”

“I guess.” Reluctant to give up her weapon, she held the crop out for Jaime. When she turned to walk back into the arena she heard Rupert tell Jaime, “the lass has anger issues Jaime.”

Claire whirled and looked at Rupert, wide-eyed and incredulous. Jaime held the crop out for her and again Rupert had enough lead to make it into his truck before she caught up.

Claire walked into the arena with her hands on her hips breathing heavy. “Well then, let me show you the wash rack.” Claire and Ruby left the arena with a big sweaty horse in tow.” When the horse was snapped into the cross-ties, Ruby laughed so hard she almost collapsed. The sound of uncontrolled laughter finally hit Claire’s funny bone with a hammer and she was soon doubled over like Ruby. The waves of sound they made raced down the aisles, bounced off of horses and walls, and even penetrated Jaime’s closed door.

Jaime looked up sharply at Angus, “what is that noise?”

Angus opened the door, “Ha, lasses laughin.”

“At what?” The sound made him happy but he could not fathom what was so funny out there. Both of them grinning, the men walked up to both women bent over and wiping tears.

“What are ye lasses laughin at then?”

Ruby’s spine turned into a metal rod and her color went from bright red to pure white in less than
three seconds.
Claire was panting for breath and when she looked at Ruby’s face she felt this would be the weak link in Ruby’s perfection. “Oh Ruby, what are we going to do about this.”

Jaime mumbled an apology and left.
Claire looked at Ruby, “C’mon, it’s Miller time”

“Hi Jaimmmme”

Claire looked up at Sarah, “I can’t hear anything.” She handed her phone to Sarah, call him back please.”

“You have to hold the phone to your ear dear one.” Sarah pushed the speaker button. “He’s there. Say something Jaime.”

“I’ve missed ye love. Havin fun are ye?”

“Yes! Buuut I drank three to six and seven glasses of punch. Because I was swimming. And it’s required.”

“Do ye lasses need someone to play spin the bottle with?” Jaime was using his best conspiratorial voice.

“No”

“Gin Rummy then, ye need a fourth player?”

“No”

“Well then lass, what did ye call me for?”

“What?”

Jaime lost it and barely got the mute button pushed before he was gripping his stomach in laughter. When he looked at the speaker icon lit up the girls heard “ah shit” from Jaime and lassie laughter filled both houses.

“Claire?”

“What?”

“What do ye need lass?”

Claire’s wide eyes looked at her friends in horror and she asked them why she called Jaime. Sarah and Ruby both lifted their shoulders. Claire looked at the floor and wandered around the living room and suddenly smiled and looked at her empty hand. “Where?”

Sarah rescued her by scooping the phone off the table where she put it down over ten seconds ago. “I have to call Jaimus…I mean Jaime.” Sarah looked at the phone, “Jaime?”

“Still here, I have an interest in how this ends ye see.”

“Wow, I must have Jaime on speed dial!”

“I’m here for ye lass.” He was enjoying the drunk Sassemach immensely.
“Oh,” she said reverently to the phone.

Sarah had not laughed like this in years and she felt sparkly inside after such a big day.

“Claire, why did you call Jaime?”

“Because I can’t drive.” Claire looked at the phone in her hand and answered it. “Hello?”

“Hello love.”

“Can you please come and get me?”

“Ye need a rescue do ye?”

“No I need a ride home because I can’t drive.”

“Yer in luck, yer truck is here at home.”

“It is? How did I get here then?”

"Ye walked Sassenach."

"ALL THE WAY TO THE BAR?! Well can you take Uber over here and drive me home?"

Sarah spoke up, “have you ever seen Claire drunk before Jaime?”

“Ah, yes and she was just as funny! Claire tell the lasses about yer sex tutorials. I am on my way love.”

“Jaime is calling Uber so he can drive my truck home.” Claire was walking away.

“Stop. I want to hear about the last time you got drunk. What class were you taking?”

Claire dissolved in giggles and said the words out loud as she remembered “blow-job” “tutorial” and “omitted how to start” then, “Tarantula” and “Silly Moutain” and other words they could not understand.

Sarah’s interest was piqued. “What class were you taking?”

“Proper execution of a blow-job.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I didn't know how.”

“you are twenty-five years old, right?”

“Yes! Once Jaimus came…peels of laughter. “There was a tarantula in the way on a Silly Mountain. It was a long time before I actually did it.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“That would be the Uber driver.”

When Sarah opened the door, brown hair bounded in and landed Claire flat on the floor.

Ruby screamed and tried to help. Claire sat up with her hair in her face. “This is Pup my dog. And
Claire looked around for Jaime and then remembered Ruby’s paralytic issue.

Claire told Sarah that “Ruby had BD…um, C…S, and some other numbers I think. She can’t be in the room with Jaime. Can Fred talk to her about this and maybe fix her so she can be on the team. Not kidding. When I leave just say Jaimus Fraser. Yule see. Oh! Need to fix her by morning or dinner time. Tell Fred to get busy.”

Sarah walked Claire outside to Jaime and handed her over. She pushed Claire’s hair out of her face. “I hope you feel okay in the morning.” Sarah hugged a swaying Claire and closed the door. Ten steps and Claire was racing back. Jeepers crap! Pup is locked inside there. I need to get him out.”

Jaime turned her around and pointed to Pup, already at Jag’s half-door licking his face.

“Awe, so sweet. Pup loves Jag, even though they’re both boys.”

Jaime looked down at her laughing, “not to mention one’s a horse and the other a dog.”

Jaime walked his future bride home and took advantage of her drunk gullibility. He told her he was chased into the mountains by coyotes. Attacked by a shadowy figure hiding in the rocks that turned out to be an insurance salesman, and a few more before the beeping code told Claire they were finally safe.

“C’mon Jaimus the tarantula made me feel hot and I need…what’s that?”

“Three aspirin and a big glass of water.”

“You are such a good man, her voice cracked with oncoming tears. Yer not even mad that I partied all night with the girls.” Jaime looked at his watch and it was ten after nine.

Sarah and Ruby laughed at the funny things Claire had said while they cleaned up the mess. Sarah was getting nervous about Ruby’s reaction to Jaime. She needed to get her talking and sneak in some pointed questions.

Ruby could not get enough of the pool so they headed out to get back in the water. Sarah ran her eyes over the bikini-clad girl looking for signs of abuse or self-mutilation, watched her walk for possible physical issues.

Ruby was eighteen years old with natural blonde hair to her shoulders, gray eyes, and Scandinavian skin. She reminded Sarah of a young Gwyneth Paltrow. She seemed painfully shy but she was plugged into the conversation all night and laughed at the appropriate times. When she had something to say she spoke up. Hmm. Maybe she just didn’t have anything to say, Sarah thought.

Ruby wanted to be an event rider and someday own a Danish Warmblood. That’s it. Sarah gave plenty of room for her to add boyfriends, marriage, a home, a career, but none of these concepts had taken root in her life. Throughout the night Sarah continued to ask questions about Ruby’s life and found her to be honest and genuine.

I have to be honest Ruby, your one desire in life, being an event rider, is not enough for a bright girl like you. What do you do when you’re not riding.

“Sometimes I paint but there won’t be much time for that.” She held her nose and dropped her head back in the water. When she came up she smiled at Sarah.

“I’m sorry I just can’t get my head around staying on a horse all day every day. What is the goal in this single-minded determination?” Sarah kept laughter in her voice so she wouldn’t inadvertently
hurt the girl’s feelings.

Ruby, still seeming genuine said, “I want to be number one, best in the world. I can’t accept anything less. If Claire invites me I will ride day and night for her. I love Claire. But, once I win all the American levels I’m off to win Europe.

Sarah was incredulous. “Have you seen the women at those levels?” Ruby laughed, I’ll be more worried about the men I’m sure. Men and women compete together in eventing. I’ll be the first woman to beat them all, I hope.

“Thank you Ruby, for sharing your hopes and dreams with me. I feel I know you so much better. Ok, let’s gossip about Claire and Jaime.” She saw Ruby smile.

“What nationality is Claire?”

“American”

“What nationality is Jaime?” She watched the girl tense up and look at her feet under the water. Ruby stammered about his accent, “like Ireland or something like that.” If this was an obsessive disorder she would know everything about Jaime. That was encouraging.

“Ruby, tell me what happens to you when Jaime Fraser is near you.” As expected, white face, arms pressed against her sides, looking down, rapid shallow breathing.

“I get nervous and can’t speak or act normal.”

“Jaime is such a good looking man. Are you in love with him Ruby?” She went for the throat and watched closely in case Ruby made a face that would betray her true feelings.

Ruby’s head shot up, “Excuse me?” Ruby didn’t want to be rude but her laughter came bubbling up. “He is like my dad’s age!”

Sarah put her hands up in surrender and Ruby tried to stop laughing. That is why she couldn’t find any of the markers of the disorders she suspected. They weren’t there. “What is the worse thing that can happen if you talk to Jaime Fraser?”

“I’m not ready yet, I don’t have enough skill yet. If he judges me now I may not get better. Not that I won’t, it’s like there will be a permanent record of how bad a rider I am. I wish I could stay invisible until I’m seen as a contender.”

“If they ask you to come here and ride for Claire, can you get over that and be normal around Jaime?”

When Ruby looked up Sarah saw her heart brake. “No” she whispered.

Sarah smiled compassionately, “that’s enough, you have had a huge day and need to rest up for tomorrow. I’m going to think about this and try to find a solution for you. Okay?” Ruby nodded and looked calmer.

Across the road, Jaime was exhausted from holding Claire back. She had sex in her head, attached to tarantulas somehow, and was climbing on him whenever he sat down, or just stopped moving for that matter. It was so hard to resist her because little miss no-brake was telling him, in detail, what she would do to him, how long it would last, and what she would make him do to her, and it was erotic.

Jaime pulled Claire into the study and sat her between his legs her back to his chest. She couldn’t
climb on him or grab his clothes and he was behind her so maybe she wouldn’t talk dirty so much.

Jaime clicked the TV on and searched for a documentary that would anesthetize her. One of Jaime’s rules was never have sex with a drunk female. Ever. Claire was so drunk she would probably have a blackout and evidence of sex you can’t remember is just creepy.

He wanted to install the swamp cooler tomorrow but had more research to do and the Tasmanian sex devil was making that impossible.

“Ah! The Great Apes! My favorite let’s watch mo chridhe.” He pulled Claire back to rest on his chest. The announcer said, “our first group is the Bonobos.”

“Wow! Claire sat up straight causing Jaime to look up at the television

“What in God’s name are they doing?” The sixty-inch screen literally filled with Bonobos having sex. Missionary, doggie style, blow-jobs, and cunnilingus, three-on-one, four-on-one, two females. Jaime shook his head in disbelief, his mouth hanging open. Then he realized in horror that Claire was quiet as a church mouse, her head pointed up at the television.

Jaime heard something like an air raid siren going off in his head. He jumped off the couch and searched for the remote. When he glanced at Claire she was smiling and pointing at the TV.

“Christ, now I’m contributing to yer porn addiction.”

Claire yawned deeply while Jaime searched for the remote and when he looked up she was deep asleep. He carried her upstairs and pulled her clothes and boots off, tucked her in and turned off the light. “I don’t envy ye in the mornin, poor lass,” he whispered.

Jaime unrolled his schematic on the kitchen table and got to work. All the components for the cooler had arrived during the week. He just needed to design the brace to hold the industrial fan. He could not wait to fire it up and they could all get some relief.

Jaime’s friends were coming in the morning to weld the brace, attach it, and hoist the fan into place. He dropped his one-inch pencil at midnight and climbed into the shower, then bed. Claire snuggled up to him and barely surfaced doing it.
Jaime’s nose pulled him out of sleep at four-thirty in the morning. The smell was making his stomach feel hollow and his mind confused. If Claire would be sick with a hangover all day, who was cooking? My God it smells heavenly.

From the loft, he could see Claire in her shortest gym shorts and cropped white T-shirt bouncing around the kitchen pushing bacon strips and flipping omelets. Wait a minute. How is she doing that? He would know in a minute.

He snuck up to her and when she turned around she ran right into his chest. “Jesus Jaime, you scared the daylights out of me!” She pulled her earbuds out and reached for him. His kiss was soft and long and Claire was fighting for breath. When he pulled back he saw the rise and fall of her chest and nipples pressed against the white cotton. She was aroused and he would be quick to follow.

“Two questions Sassenach” he pulled her to him and whispered in her ear. “Why are ye not sick this mornin and is it yer intention to burn the bacon?”

Claire jumped at the second question and turned the burner off before scooping the meat onto paper towels to drain the grease. She smiled at him and the heat in her eyes almost crippled his appetite. “Sit and eat. We have a big day today and need calories.” She carried two plates to the table because Jaime seemed stuck.

When she turned toward the table Jaime looked at the bare skin exposed on her back and her shorts worn low making him burn to see her glorious butt. Her muscled lower cheeks were clearly poking out under the shorts. He wanted to touch them. When she turned around he jerked his eyes to meet hers.

“Are you coming?”

At least once he thought and sat down to eat. Claire’s deplorably slow consumption of food seemed agonizingly slower this morning. Tolerable because she kept piling food on his plate.

She watched his shirtless chest with an unbearable need to touch him, lick him in all her favorite places. She had a long list of things that needed her attention but that would have to wait. Her eyes lingered on his beautiful chest and huge arms. She wanted to know how strong he really was and her fantasy played out like a warlord and a maiden. She breathed through an open mouth watching the gorgeous and uncivilized man forcefully hold the maiden down and ravish her.

“Sassenach?”

“What?” she jerked her eyes to his, “sorry, what?” Between blinks, Jamie pulled her out of her seat and held her to him tightly. He looked at her face, her eyes, as he ran his hand up her thigh and under her shorts.

“Yer in another world, aren’t ye Sassenach. Yer locked in yer head having a moment only you can see, aye?” His mouth was so close she could feel his breath. “Take me there mo chridhe, please, where are ye, what’s happenin to ye. Tell me love.” He whispered in her ear as his hands fondled her breasts and pinched a nipple hard.

She gasped and told him in enough detail to make him fight his groin for control. He carried her upstairs and they enjoyed a passionate shower and the sweet release they both chased.
Still in a euphoric state of mind, they descended the street to the barn at a leisurely pace. Pup was about to come undone waiting for them. The goofy K-9 ran up to them and humped at their feet. When a bark finally came out they heard Jag whinny and Pup was racing toward the half door.

Jaime retreated to his office with the rolled schematic under his arm and Claire went to see her favorite couple with an apple for each. She hugged Ginger and then Fred, whispering congratulations for his miracle the previous night. When she emerged from all that horseflesh she looked up to see Lance, her trainer, walking toward Jaime’s office. She shook her head wondering what was going on.

Claire was excited to ride Jag this morning as her personal riding time was limited with four greenies in the house. Jag was excited too and she had to hold him close to the bit to keep him steady and walking forward. Today he could cut loose. She swung up in the arena and let Jag set his own walk while she pulled on her gloves and locked her chin strap. Somehow, Jag knew it was time to work and he snorted his agreement into the hot air.

Angus was already working with Ruby inside and Claire whistled she was ready. Angus came out and climbed up on the fence. Ruby pulled the reins of the bay and let him munch grass while they watched. One of Jaime’s rules was no one jumps alone. They waited for Claire to build speed and point Jag at the first jump. Angus clicked the stopwatch.

Ruby had witnessed this level of jumping from the stands at horse shows and on the internet. Today she was close enough to reach out and touch them. She watched Claire’s seat and how she hovered over Jag’s neck over the jumps. It was more than flexing at the hips. Claire’s arms and hands followed Jags mouth as he extended his head over the jumps and then back when they landed. Ruby learned more watching Claire over twelve jumps than all the clinics she had taken up to that point.

Angus shouted “wrong lead!” and Claire looked back at him and smiled. Five strides before the jump she changed to the correct lead and put a strong leg on Jag. They sailed over a coffin jump that was five feet wide and Ruby almost passed out from holding her breath.

Jaime had walked across the barn roof to watch them jump and Lance was right behind him. When Claire let out a whoop Jaime turned around and almost ran into Lance.

“How can you watch your fiance do that.” He asked.

“It isna easy.”

Claire walked Jag until he was cool and then traded with Ruby. The chestnut bay was not happy about being pulled away from his grass munching and Claire detected a defiant attitude in the monster. She handed the reins to Angus and ran for her spurs.

She asked Ruby to pull Jag’s tack and come out to the arena. Once she pushed her spurs on she climbed the arena fence and swung her leg over the huge horse. He was a thoroughbred with a nicely muscle butt and chest but he had an attitude some days that made Claire feel like a painful lesson was coming. She pushed him into the bit and collected him for a fine bow to his neck. He was playing with the bit and frothing nicely. Claire schooled him in the gates with a deep seat and quiet leg. The horse was listening to her leg and seemed relaxed and willing until she leaned her hips forward and ask for some speed. The horse basically said, not today thank you.

Angus saw the horse drop his head deep as Ruby came to the fence. “Oh boy, that laddie chose the wrong lassie to fuck with today.”

Ruby was pressed into the fence watching the battle between Claire and the bay. She watched his
head drop almost to the ground and held her breath for a wicked buck from such a large horse.

Claire was surprised he would have the nerve to be so uncivilized. “Really? Are you really that stupid?” She brought her crop down on the side of his head and the snap was heard on the other side of the barn, directly into Jaime’s ears. When the horse jerked his head away from the offending crop Claire used her spurs to push him forward until his head came up and the bit was on her side again. She pushed him mercilessly. On and on, she dug her spurs into him and was ready for his next move with a punishing crop. This went on for ten minutes. The horse was soaked with sweat and Claire did not let up.

When the bay figured out that his rider was not taking no for an answer he capitulated. Claire patted his neck and praised him. He sailed over eight jumps like he was stepping over cavaletti. Claire let out a whoop! The bay dropped his head and bucked hard enough he almost unseated her.

“You idiot bastard!” While his hind legs were still in the air, Claire’s crop gave him a hard dose of reality in three hard smacks to his hindquarters.

Jaime was leaning against the barn watching and his body jerked with each snap of the crop. Lance looked at Jaime, “what the hell is going on?”

Jaime took a breath. “Claire is really pissed at that horse.” He shook his head, “poor lad.” He looked at Lance’s nervous expression, “ready to get my contraption off the ground?” He walked back to the construction side of the barn leaving Lance to witness the wrath of the Sassenach.

Angus was shocked to see the horses head drop to the ground. He prepared to see a flying Claire and looked at what might be in her path. His feet were resting on the middle board of the arena fence and he stood up to watch Claire in her glory. “Ah, nice try laddie” he shouted.

Claire pushed the monster over five more jumps and let out a louder whoop! She gripped the crop waiting and finally let the horse pull the reins and extend his neck. Claire leaned back and dropped her seat into the saddle. Drenched with sweat but calm and smiling.

Ruby’s face looked mortified. “Am I going to have to do that?”

“Ha! If ye do this long enough, yer gonna run into a belligerent bugger like that. Hopefully, ye get out of the sport before that happens.” He laughed, not knowing that Ruby felt a new resolve. Prepare for belligerence.

When Claire jumped off the bay she pulled his tack and closed him into his stall. She looked at Ruby, ready for some push back.

“I need more strength in my legs Claire.”

“Well, let’s go talk to Lance. He’s my strength trainer, maybe he can do both of us at the same time.” Lance’s friend Vinnie was finishing up the last weld while Lance teased Jaime mercilessly about his contraption. Jaime smiled and took the ribbing. When Vinnie was done he slapped paint on the welds and they all walked into the shade of the barn.

The girls walked up and Lance bowed to Claire making her laugh. “That is a tribute to your training Lance.” She was smiling and wrapped her arms around Jaime’s waist. Ruby, of course, had vanished. Claire looked up at the large ropes thrown over beams in the roof structure, and the wide vents cut into the side wall of the barn. She wanted to ask Jaime where he came up with the idea but thought better of it.

An enormous industrial fan was being tied with the ropes and the three men each took a rope and
pulled until the fan was lifted into the brace and seated. Next, they ran a pole through what looked like a soaking bale of hay in a large water trough. The ropes were attached again and Lance and Vinnie pulled it into the air. Jaime was up in the hayloft prepared to wrangle the pole into the brace.

Claire looked up at Jaime, an easy twenty feet above them and thought how easy it would be for him to fall. She held her breath and finally heard the thing clang into the structure. Lance released a long breath. Jesus Jaime, I hope you know what you’re doing!”

Jaime looked down and laughed, not really, but I have tremendous hope.

Vinnie looked up at Jaime, “you pull this design off the internet?”

“Well no. Couldn’a find anything big enough.” He was struggling to get the other side of the pole to snap into the brace and asked Lance to throw a rope over and pull it down. When the rope flew over the pole Jaime jumped from the hayloft five feet to the pole and grabbed the ropes. They heard the clang of the pole sink into the brace and Jaime slid down the ropes.

Claire was white-faced but smiling when he grabbed her and growled in her ear. Lance was shaking his head looking at them. “What’s up with all the death-defying stuff around here? You guys should consider therapy for adrenaline addiction or something.”

Everyone was laughing but Jaime who stared up at his contraption with a worried look. He watched and waited. Finally, he saw the huge bale of hay start to turn like a rotisserie. The group looked up as a five-foot wide curtain of hay unwound itself and descended for ten feet. The trough was brought in and placed under the hay to catch the water that dripped from it.

Vinnie called from outside, “you ready?”

“Yes! Turn it on!” Jaime called and grabbed Claire with excitement.

The fan sounded like a jet engine was warming up and blew air into the wet curtain of hay. Lance and Vinnie both looked at Jaime like he had lost his marbles. They both observed silent respect for their daft friend and started putting tools away.

Claire looked up at Jaime, “what’s suppose to happen?”

“Well, that part is a secret Sassenach. Even to me.”

It was a big barn with a lot of hot air in it. Jaime knew it would take time but he was certain it would work. They said goodbye to Lance and Vinnie. “Time for our meeting mo chridhe.”

Once the team was assembled in Jaime’s office, and Rupert was nudged awake, the meeting about taking on Ruby began. An hour later they adjourned and Rupert went home to sleep on his couch and drink beer. Angus did the same.

Jaime was heading home for a much needed Saturday break and Claire was hanging back to work with Ruby. When they walked into the main aisle Claire gasped and looked at a smiling Jaime. The air temperature had dropped at least ten degrees and Claire could feel the cooled air rushing by her.

“Oh my God, you are a genius!” She threw her arms around his waist. “Wow, it’s really going to work!” Claire noticed the horses were more active in their stalls and Jag was banging his foot on his corral bars. “I love my genius.”

Jaime walked up the street feeling like he was eight-years-old. He looked to the heavens and said “thank Christ.” In theory, his plan had to work to some degree, it was just a modified swamp cooler.
Still, the ribbing from Lance and Vinnie made him doubt at the last minute.

He was sweating and soaked through his clothing, the humidity was rising. He looked up at a clear blue sky and wished for rain. Watering the lawn and pastures could not keep up with the scorching sun so some help from above wouldn’t hurt.

Ruby was on the second horse and Claire was calling her changes and making adjustments to her body and legs. Ruby would hear it once and the correction was locked in.

“I think we should name these horses, at least for us,” Claire called to Ruby.

“This one should be called Daisy because he’s so sweet” Ruby yelled as she sailed over a jump.

“He’s a gelding” Claire laughed, almost jumping out of her skin when Sarah touched her back.

Claire and Sarah chatted and watched Ruby. “Sarah, my lease is up and I was wondering if you want to take my place. It’s expensive but I definitely thought the view was worth it” Claire was smiling at the end of her sentence because Sarah had said yes four times.

“A thousand times yes Claire! Oh my God this is so perfect.” Sarah’s eyes were sparkling with excitement. “You have certainly changed my life Claire Beauchamp, and I couldn’t be happier.”

“That’s good for …um…Daisy” she called to Ruby. “I say we break for a swim!” Claire pulled her shirt away from her wet skin and wiped the sweat off her forehead. “God it’s hot today.”

Ruby cooled the horse and put him up. She figured it would rain later because the humidity was rising and very uncomfortable.

Claire rolled the big door open and looked up, “Holy Christ, what the hell is that?” There was a brown wall moving toward them, she couldn’t see above it and couldn’t see around it. There was no noise or wind, just an ominous brown wall creeping ever closer.

“Jeepers that is gonna dump serious dust!” Ruby yelled as she ran outside and started slamming the half-doors closed. She was running and the barn was getting darker as she moved quickly from stall to stall.

Claire was struck dumb, watching this thing. She had never seen anything like this before and it scared her to the bone. “What is that? What happens when it reaches us?”

“It’s a dust storm, but I have never in my life seen one so big. It will whip dust in the air and your eyes for a few minutes and then it’s gone. But that one seems really huge.”

The wall of sand, dust, and dirt was actually a mile high and an estimated fifty miles across. It moved slowly across the valley engulfing everything in its path. It was no ordinary dust storm. It was called a Haboob, a dust storm on steroids and most locals had never actually seen one. They were about to.

Claire’s eyes were huge as she watched it. Ruby was running around the outside of the barn latching, stowing, closing, and preparing. She looked up at the thing coming closer. This will not be pleasant she thought.

Sarah gasped and called to Claire, “I turned the horses out!” She threw a lead to Claire and they ran for the pasture gate. Claire looked up at the wall coming. She could feel the wind whipping her hair and her eyes were stinging. She saw the wall slowly cover the far end of the pasture and panicked. The wicked mass was upon them and she could not see the horses.
The wind whipped dust and dirt at the women and snatched their voices. They ran into the pasture looking. Ginger trotted up with nostrils open and snorting. She was scared and eager to be lead to the barn. Claire pointed at the barn and Sarah nodded leading Ginger away. Claire tried to look for Fred but her eyes were tearing from the bombardment of dust and dirt. She turned her back to the wind and thought she saw him. She was running and calling him but he wouldn’t move. Gulping air, her mouth quickly filled the debris swirling all around her.

Claire threw her arms around Fred’s neck and tried to comfort him but the wind made it impossible for him to hear. He felt like a stone statue as every muscle was tense. Claire was struggling. The wind was getting stronger and the sun was completely blocked. She stood with Fred who refused to move. She clung to him and prayed for the storm to move faster. “Please Fred, come on!”

The sound of the wind came screaming into Jaime’s dream and smacked him hard in the face. His eyes jerked open and he looked out the window. Jumping into his clothes he drove his truck down to the barn to spare his eyes. He raced for the barn happy to see the half doors latched down but he saw no people. When he remembered the new fan he started running for the other side. It didn’t dawn on him that he could not hear the fan but when he got closer he saw someone had shut it down.

Jaime ran through the barn and saw twenty or more fifty-pound bags of horse feed stacked against the wall next to the arena door where deliveries were left. The door was pounding against the frame and he pushed it open to find Ruby with a sack over her shoulder trying to get inside. Jaime pushed hard against the door to get it open and Ruby bolted in throwing the sack down with the rest. She was panting for air. Next came Sarah, dragging another bag through the door. Ruby couldn’t breathe but she ducked her head and headed back outside.

Jaime’s arm came up to stop her. He put his hand up to the women to stay inside. He made four trips, two bags at a time. He was winded and his eyes watered fiercely. He motioned Sarah away from the door and it slammed shut from the force of the wind. He wiped his eyes with his shirt and ran for the office and a bottle of water for each of them to pour into their eyes. Ruby had vanished and Sarah was cursing the pain in her eyes.

Claire was beyond scared. She wouldn’t leave Fred but desperately wanted to get out of the storm. She pulled her sleeveless white T-shirt off and ripped the neck to accommodate the size of Fred’s head. She pushed it up his face to cover his eyes and tucked it securely into the halter. She waited for a minute and pulled the lead to the side. Fred followed. Each step made her braver and she was flooded with relief. She led Fred to the gate which was ten feet wide, five feet high and made of aluminum. For a gate that large it was relatively easy to maneuver.

Claire fumbled with the gate because her hands were shaking. She looked up and thought she saw Jaime running toward them. When she pulled the chain away from the gate, the wind picked it up, wrenching it from the hinges and pulled it into the air. Fred reared in a panic and Claire screamed from the shock of the gate being pulled violently from her hands. Claire crouched on the ground with her arms over her head, terrified of where the gate would come down. She couldn’t see much anymore, her eyes were so full of dirt and grit. She was completely spent and barely managed to hang onto Fred.

Jaime’s arms pulled her up and he took the lead from her. He pointed at the barn and Claire started running with her arm up to protect her eyes. She heard Fred shrieking again and stopped. Jaime struggled to calm Fred when he felt Claire’s arm on him. She walked to Fred and laid her face on his neck for a full minute. When they walked forward, Fred followed. Jaime rolled the door open and they rushed inside.

Sarah grabbed Fred, and Jaime led Claire to the office where bottled water would flush her eyes.
Claire felt the grip of fear loosen and as the wind howled outside she let Jaime pull her into his lap and dab her scratched face with a wet paper towel.

Sarah looked at them and smiled stepping into the office. “God, you two almost make me want to try another Mr. Wrong. I have an extra shirt in my footlocker Claire, I’ll get it.”

“The wind took the gate up, I was so scared it would land on top of us, but it never came down.” Her eyes were watering profusely and she kept them closed.

“Well, it’ll come down somewhere, that I ken.” He looked at Claire, so small on his lap. Her hair was twisted into knots and he wondered how she would ever pull those out.

Sarah walked into the tack room and stopped dead. Ruby was sitting on the floor with her back against the wall and her arm around a trembling Pup. His nose was pushed into the corner and sheets of drool fell from both sides of his mouth. “He won’t move so I stayed with him,” Ruby said with her eyes full of tears. “He acts like he wants to die and I’m sad about that.” She wiped her tears on the back of her hand.

Sarah’s heart nearly broke at the sight of them. She sat down on a footlocker next to them and squeezed her hand. “He is lucky you found him and stayed.” She ran her hand down his back. From what I hear this guy has had a pretty scary life so far. It’s no wonder he’s terrified. I have a shirt for Claire and I will send her in.”

Claire took the shirt gratefully and looked at the paper towel roll being handed to her. “What’s that for?”

Pup is stuck in the corner of the tack room and drooling badly. Ruby’s with him. She looked at Jaime.

Claire ran to the tack room and looked at her poor frightened dog. “Oh Pup.” She motioned Ruby to stay and sat on the other side of Pup. She wiped the sheets of drool from his mouth and tried to make him look at her. He wouldn’t move. The storm was moving away and the wind could hardly be heard now. Claire put her hand on Pups cheek and told Ruby he would come around if they started talking normally.

Sarah came in sat on the footlocker again. The girls were talking about corrections Claire had suggested and Pup yawned. Always a good sign.

“Ruby I’m gonna head for the house before the storm hits. See you later Claire.” Both women left and Claire was alone with Pup trying to understand Sarah’s last statement. What the heck did she mean when the storm hits?

This would be Claire’s first monsoon season so she couldn’t have expected the intense electrical storm right above them getting ready to unleash its fury.

Jaime peeked into the tack room. “I have a plan. Want to hear it?” When Claire nodded he said, “if we hurry we can beat the rain home, drink some whiskey, and watch the storm come in from the lounge. You need to get out of this barn once in a while Sassenach. C’mon, its a favorite thing of mine.” He pulled Claire up and held her hand.

Pup followed without hesitation. He still looked worried but he didn’t want to be alone.

They made sure the barn was closed up and headed for the truck. When Claire stepped outside she was shocked to see the sky looking angry with swollen clouds, dark and menacing. They ran into the house just as the rain started. Jaime grabbed towels, Claire poured the whiskey and almost dropped
the bottle when thunder rolled above them.

I want to peel these clothes off. It will take me half a minute. Jaime went out to the back patio and stretched out on the lounge. Claire ran downstairs in a light cotton sundress and joined Jaime.

“Wow! This is really something, and so loud.” She snuggled against Jaime and took her glass. The lightning was spectacular, racing across the sky followed by crackling thunder. Jaime was right she thought, this is a thrill. Because of their elevation, they could see the rain start and stop across the valley floor. As strong winds were pushed in front of the large storm clouds and the temperature dropped almost sixty degrees. Claire cuddled into Jaime and watched the amazing show.

Jaime kissed his bride to be, first softly, biting her lip and dancing with her tongue. He ran his hand up her leg and under her dress kissing her more passionately. He pulled Claire’s body on top of him and his kisses became deeper. She pressed her hips into him and felt his need. The rain fell so heavy they couldn’t see the barn, or anything for that matter. All around the patio was a solid wall of water with crackling thunder above. Jaime worked his hands under her frock and was building her heat. She straddled him and popped his button pulling his zipper down. Jaime pushed his jeans over his hips and Claire lifted him to her sinking down around him. Jaime gasped and rocked her hips. He laid his thumb alongside her heat so they would both feel the surge of pleasure every time she dropped down on him. Her wee noises were not so we suddenly and Jaime felt her inner muscles spasm and grip him. “Faster Sassenach.” Several thrusts and Jaime felt the sensation express pull him in and shoot him down the track. He pulled Claire down to cuddle her.

He kissed her mouth and cheeks, “how did I ever live without you mo chridhe?”

Pup was crying at the door and Claire reluctantly got up. “You need a bath anyway Pup, c’mon.” Pup bounded into the rain, leaping into the air to bite the raindrops. Claire was laughing and stepped out into the rain with him. She lifted her arms up, palms to the sky and let nature soak her.

Jaime watched her, so uninhibited, so happy getting soaked. His heart felt like it would burst with love and he laughed at the two of them. Pup preferred Claire on the ground where he could get at her and it didn’t take long before he pinned her in the grass, in the rain, in front of the man who adored her.

Claire asked Jaime to get Pup’s shampoo and bath commenced. Claire’s dress was covered in soap bubbles and the rain picked up again making it hard to breathe out there. She came in under the patio cover and locked eyes with Jaime. Sometimes these long looks said more than their mouths could ever hope to. She smiled brightly at Jaime, right before she jumped on him with her soaked dress and hair.
“All right Ruby, it’s time to wake up…3-2-1”. Dr. Arnold snapped his fingers and Ruby’s eyes opened. She yawned deeply and smiled sheepishly at the doctor. This was her third session of hypnosis to help her communicate with Jaime. There was no change after the first two sessions and she doubted the third would be any different.

Sarah looked at Ruby as they drove home. “How do you think it went today?”

Ruby looked down at her lap. “It’s my fault it’s not working. I keep falling asleep. I don’t mean to but his voice just puts me right out.”

Sarah laughed, “I think that is intentional. If you think of Jaime, what do you feel?”

Ruby let out a long breath. “The usual.”

Dan Arnold was a colleague of Sarah’s who offered to help Ruby if she would agree to be added as a case history in his new book, anonymously of course. Dan wrote his post-session notes. Ruby is easy to induce but resistant to let go of the aversion to Jaime Fraser. She stated her new job was an express ticket to what she wanted most in the world but she cannot even communicate with her employer. Ruby is a walking contradiction. It is time to open her secrets and try to help this young girl cope with crippling hero worship.

Ruby walked into the barn after her session and saw Jaime and Rupert turn the corner into the main aisle. She jogged to them searching her pockets for the special feed distributor she had looked up. Jaime’s eyes were huge because she was addressing him and not running into a stall to hide. It took a while for her to find the right pocket but she eventually handed him a note with the information. She looked him in the eyes and then jogged off to get the next horse ready.

“Thank ye lass,” was mumbled as he looked down at Rupert. “I guess it worked then.”

Rupert was still watching the direction she took. “What worked Jaime?”

“What happened to the lassie ye were datin?”

“Jane.” Rupert looked even more stoned saying her name.

“If I see ye lookin at Claire that way I’ll murder ye in yer sleep.”

“Why would I look at Claire at all?” Rupert asked like he had poison in his mouth. Jaime was already walking out of the barn. He had been summoned to Dougal’s office.

Jaime walked into Dougal’s office not knowing what to expect. He shook hands with Dougal and Vladimir and sat down passing his business plan and property drawing to Dougal.

“All the raw desert around your property, any of for sale?” Dougal ran his finger around the area he was referring to.

“Yes, twenty acres that border my pasture I dearly want. If that sells I’m landlocked.”

Dougal looked up. “Yer doin a fine job buildin yer business Jaime. Yer business plan has new branches, breeding, a second barn, cross country course whatever that is, and this area what is d-r-e-s-s-a-g-e ring? I’m, sure you have the numbers for the second barn. What do those look like?”
Jaime was furious with Dougal. He stood and started rolling up his property map. “With all due respect Dougal. My books are open to ye but ye have no business peakin into my future plans. I’m grateful to ye Vladimir for helpin me with Claire’s ring, truly, but I’ll be on my way now.”

Vladimir stood up and put his hands on Jaime’s shoulders. “I ask you for a moment more of your time. Please. I have an offer for you.”

Jaime sat down against his better judgment. Jaime was a planner and spent many hours visualizing everything he wanted for the property. There was tremendous detail in his property map made possible by all the lonely nights he spent living in the barn in the early days. It felt like a violation to have an outsider scrutinize his dream.

Vladimir talked for thirty minutes. When Jaime shook hands with both men he barely heard a word out of either of them. He needed a quiet place to think and absorb everything Vladimir was offering. Jaime could not get home fast enough. He dropped onto his sofa and unrolled the map on the ottoman. When he looked at the barn and arena he heard crowds of people at a horse show. He heard thundering hooves and his own heavy breathing when he looked at the cross country course. Each piece had its own sound. Now Vladimir was offering to make it happen ten years earlier than he planned.

At first, Vladimir wanted a partnership in the second barn, Jaime refused. He wanted to be the sole investor in twelve horses per year. Jaime refused explaining his team invested in the horses and that would never change. In the end, Vladimir settled for a personal loan, like Dougal’s and at the same interest rate. Jaime needed more investors so he asked for the terms and amount. That was the last normal breath he took.

Vladimir sat down and smiled at Jaime. “The amount is up to you. One dollar to one million is good with me.” Then he sat back and folded his hands.

Dougal saw the color drop out of Jaime’s face and his wide eyes regarded both of the men. “Yer a smart lad Jaime, ye’ve a talent for runnin the business. To us, we want to put our money on a world champion because whatever pushed ye to the top is still in ye.”

Jaime felt his head would crack open so he stopped thinking until he saw Claire. Bringing her to mind filled him with peace, love, and happiness. It was the end of August, his hardest month because that is when the eventing season starts. Every year he would suffer from anxiety attacks, jagged nerves, and crippling forgetfulness. He usually went on a bender for a week, got in fights, and generally alienated his loyal friends. This year August was just like July and June and May, happy, loving, and exciting because of Claire.

Jaime heard the front door close and walked out to find Claire. She stood in front of the door bent over a wiggly Pup and when she looked at Jaime she smiled. He looked at the length of her, pencil skirt, white blouse, matching jacket, black heels. Her hair was tied in a bun at her nape and she wore a bit of make-up he wasn’t used to. She was magnificent. He held her for a minute then she slipped away to change clothes. Jaime stretched out on the bed and listened to the details of her interview. He could tell she was very impressed with the practice and wanted the offer.

Claire put on a comfy cotton sundress and came to lay next to Jaime. “Are you hungry?”

Jaime looked at her, “could ye handle the Mountain Cafe Sassenach?”

Claire jumped off the bed, shoved her sandals on, and was waiting at the door with her purse in under a minute. Jaime laughed and they left.
While they ate, Jaime filled her in on his meeting. When he told her the loan amount Claire almost choked on her food. She locked her exotic eyes on blue ice and said: “go on.”

“Yer my partner now Sassenach so it’s no my decision alone. I hope we’re buildin somethin of worth that our bairns will take over someday. I think a love of horses is a fair bet considerin their parents.” Jaime got butterflies in his stomach whenever they talked about starting a family. His da told him all his life that a man finds a job, gets married and has children. He would be thirty years old this year and didn’t want to wait.

Claire touched his cheek. “You are such a good man. It’s such a lovely feeling to have complete trust in my life partner. I appreciate being included in this decision Jaime but I have no head for business or investors as you do. If you want to talk something out I am here to listen. The decision will be yours and I will stand behind it one hundred percent.”

Jaime pulled her seat next to him and wrapped his arms around her. “Now then, can we talk about the bairns who will inherit our great wealth and land?”

Claire kissed Jaime and her eyes were full of love. “I think we should wait for Hogmanay.”

Jaime’s eyebrows shot up. “This year Claire, after we’re married…then?” She nodded and he crushed her to him. “This has been a day of miracles, first Ruby, then Dougal, and now my love is ready for a bairn.”

“Wait… what about Ruby?”

He leaned his face into her ear, “Ruby doesna have a problem with me, the hypnosis worked.” He nuzzled her neck and growled making Claire squeak with shivers.

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Three months later.

Claire leaned against the window sill at five in the morning watching Jaime and Donus. She never tired of watching them. Her favorite part was after Jaime dismounted he would race Donus to the gate and hug him before leading back to the barn.

It was November thirtieth and the frenetic winter schedule was in full swing. There were eight new greenies in the house, instead of four, and horse shows almost every weekend. Ruby was a tireless, dedicated, miracle for Claire. Not once had she failed to do all asked of her. Claire knew she wanted to show and she felt weirdly territorial about being the rider. Maybe, one of the riders would be okay, she thought.

Claire felt tired, deep fatigue had settled into her body and it never seemed to lessen, no matter how much sleep she got. She sighed and looked at the bed she wanted desperately to get back into. Instead, she headed for the shower and another day of patients and surgery.

Claire had accepted the offer to join Joe Abernathy’s practice in Tempe. It was closer than Phoenix and she had fallen in love with Joe and his wife Gayle. The three of them worked together five days a week and had formed a bond that warmed Claire’s heart.

Claire walked into her office and fell into her chair. The short ride seemed to take everything out of her. She put her head back and closed her eyes.

“Claire.” Her eyes flew open and she looked up at Joe’s concerned face.

“You are dead on your feet missy. What’s going on with you? Let me guess, your fiance is wanting
too much practice before the wedding vows.”

Claire blinked her eyes. Felt an overwhelming surge in her stomach and ran for the bathroom. She couldn’t remember the last time she threw up, but suddenly recalled why she hated it so much. Running cold water into her mouth she looked up at her reflection and like an angel had blown the truth into her ear, she knew she was pregnant.

“Oh my God!” Claire struggled to get back to her chair. “Oh my God” a minute later, “oh my God.” At lunch, she bought a home pregnancy test. She held the positive test in her shaking hand with wide wondrous eyes. She could hardly wait to tell Jaime and her excitement got her through the rest of the day.

Claire made it home a bit early and had dinner in the oven and whiskey poured when Jaime walked in. He kissed her mouth, cheeks, throat, and forehead, so happy to see her.

They sat on the couch and unloaded to each other about their day. “It’s almost time to eat. Oh, by the way,” she looked into his ice blue eyes, “you’re going to be a father.”

Jaime looked struck dumb while he digested her last statement. His hands grabbed hers to keep her there on the couch with him. When he finally looked into her eyes he saw tears spilling out of them and a smile on her face.

“Father, father… ye said father right Sassenach? That would mean ye pregnant”, pause…” right Sassenach?”

“Yes you adorable Scot, that means I’m pregnant.” Claire wiped her tears so she could see Jaime’s joy.

Jaime pressed his head to Claire’s, “without a period for the last two months, I have been prayin every day ye were pregnant. I am so happy mo chridhe.” He kissed her all over her face and then her mouth, so sweetly and wrapped her up in his arms.

After dinner, they walked down to the barn with Pup. Claire untied the carrot bunches and gave them to Fred, Ginger, and Jag. She missed Jag and realized her pregnancy would curtail her riding even more. She couldn’t deny it made her sad.

She left to hear the updates from the team and was happy when Angus asked her to swing up on a new filly who was being difficult. “No problem” as she walked to the arena.

Jaime cut in front of her and smiled to Angus, “I’ll do it. I need the practice.” He was on the horse before anyone knew what was happening.

Sarah had been putting her stuff away and heard Jaime’s exclamation that he would ride. She looked at Claire and thought for a moment. “A love child?”

Claire was bursting to tell her and the women clung to each other laughing. Ruby walked over to them, “what’s going on?” then it was a three-way girl hug.

Angus sat in center arena and glared at the women. “What’s with all the laughin, what’s them lasses got to laugh about?”

Rupert’s shoulders went up, “I dinna ken. Maybe they won the lottery. Who cares as long as we arna gettin dragged into it.”

“Ye dinna ken what’s happening here, Rupert. They’re takin over. Soon Jaime gonna have women
all over this place and we’ll be headin back to Scotland.”

“I miss my mam,” Rupert said sadly.

“Why do I even bother, ye dolt!”

Jamie handed the reins to Rupert. “As long as ye lads are together I have good news! Claire is pregnant.” Jaime was beaming.

“Well then, that’s perfect.” Angus threw the crop over his head and walked away.

“Dinna fash Jaime, he kens the women are takin over and we’ll be goin back to Scotland.” Rupert was looking at his boots.

“I need a favor, grab Angus before he leaves. I’m callin a team meeting right now. Jaime jogged to his office. He didn’t like where this was going one bit. It was time to get his team refocused. He scratched out his biggest concerns so he wouldn’t forget anything. He looked up at Claire, Angus, and Rupert filing in. “Close the door please.”

“The energy has shifted this past month and I have been remiss in keeping you all plugged in. Yer comin to yer own conclusions and they’re wrong. Let me show you your future.” With that, he spread out his property map and pointed out all the features he was implementing with Vladimir’s money. “The property bordering the big pasture is in escrow. The barn is bein drafted as we speak. The arena will be expanded almost double its size. The cross country track will stretch thirty-five acres of varying terrain with jumps for all three levels, two water features, hilltops, ditches, and it will be planted up with groves of citrus, see, here and here. Large shade trees will be planted throughout. Schooling pens, three of them.”

Jaime sat back and regarded his friends. “This is my dream-team right here. Each of us is the best at what we do. We rely on each other to get these greenies ready for sale and it works for us. You two are rich by Scotland’s standards and I’m about to make ye richer.”

“I need ye more than I did the day ye stepped off the plane from Scotland. I’m askin ye to pledge yer next five years to me. I canna do this without ye. If ye want to leave after that ye’ll have one hundred thousand, if not more, to take with ye. If ye bail now I’ll return the investor’s money and all this will be forgotten.”

Jaime looked from one man to the other. He waited.

“I’m with ye Jaime,” Angus said through a huge smile. “It’s amazin what’s about to happen. I’m stayin.”

Rupert sat up straight, “me too Jaime, I pledge the next five years, but I miss me mam and was thinkin of goin home for Hogmanay.”

“That brings me to my next topic, the extra people who are helpin the team. I’ve decided to keep those people as employees rather than team members. We are the only four who will invest in the greenies. That is forever gentlemen.”

“Two more issues to ask each of ye about. I’m lookin for two broodmares, cheap as I can get them, no more than four years old with a champion sire line. If I’m lucky enough to find them the man who is responsible for all this wants to be a partner. That means the team will not have an option on the foals. Do any of you want to invest in the breeding program?” Jaime looked at the guys both shaking their heads no.
“Last thing, ha, not by a long shot, as the American’s say. We stick together. I want no part of a weakened team because we’re spread all over this property map, ye ken. We will continue to power into the show grounds like we own the place and support our rider. He motioned to Claire. It works. It’s always worked. We need to hire a maintenance manager to build twenty-three jumps, expand the arena, build fences around the new land, and stand in as manager when we’re away. He will be under yer supervision Rupert until ye get stupid and pile yer workload on him. He will live on site and eliminate the need for security when we’re gone. What do ye have to say about that ladies and gentlemen?”

Claire had been in a stupor just watching her dynamic love pull everyone into his dream. She was so proud of him. He was going back to base to secure the most important people to him, and she was bowled over. Such a strong leader, such an excellent father. Suddenly she wanted to be in their bed holding him and telling him what her heart was saying.

“A vote please,” Jaime said with an authoritarian voice. “The ayes have it. Now that I have yer pledge, and you are fully informed, it’s time to get my pregnant, almost wife, home.” He looked at both men with his heart open. “Thank ye, I won’t disappoint ye.”

It was a very emotional evening and Claire was ready for bed with the most handsome man who ever walked the earth. Pup stuck his head around the door of Jag’s stall with wood shavings stuck to his head yawning deeply. Jaime whistled again and he bounded for the barn door and home.

Jaime pulled Claire’s clothes off piece by piece with soft kisses in between and then held her close for a long hot shower building her heat slowly. Jaime was in no mood for the chase just yet. He was leading and it would be a slow climb. He dried her body and hair with a towel and covered her skin with the lotion she liked. He used her blow dryer and fluffed her hair the way she did. Every few minutes kissing her shoulder, neck, or nape. Carrying her to bed, he kissed from her toes to her mouth and then kissed her deeply until she was breathless.

Jaime caressed her breasts, “my bairn will suckle your breasts one year from now. It’s a wondrous thing mo chridhe. I want to make this a night we will remember so I must go slow and take ye higher than ye’ve ever been.” Claire was trying to breathe and slow her heat to match Jaime’s pace. It was not easy.

When they collapsed together with heaving chests he pulled her to him and whispered “Sorcha” in her ear.

Claire felt the word belonged to her but was too tired to ask. She wanted to tell Jaime so many things, so many emotions, but all would have to wait until her next conscious moment.

Jaime looked at his love asleep in his arms. He was starting to comprehend the sacrifice she would make for their child. Her body would grow and become uncomfortable, she would give up riding for the next year, she would monitor her diet, take special vitamins, and bear the physical discomfort through long surgeries, and horse shows where she would help Ruby ride to glory. She alone would bear Eve’s pain to bring the bairn into the world and then love and cherish the child until her dying day. He was overwhelmed with her gift and laid down beside her saying the Gallic prayer ‘a mother’s love.’
December brought happiness to Fraser Equestrian Center and Jaime had to shake his head at the change in the team and boarders alike. The whole atmosphere of the barn was suddenly upbeat, social, and helpful to each other. Sarah and Ruby decorated the barn for Christmas including a real tree that could be planted when the decorations came down.

It would be another month before the City of Mesa approved the construction of the new barn but there was plenty of other projects to start. Claire, Jaime, and Rupert designed twenty-three jumps to be built into the cross country course along with movement of the earth to create hills and water drops. The property plan was updated with the new land and multiple copies were made for each project.

Angus created a rotation schedule whereby every month four greenies were up for sale and four were just starting their training. Claire studied the schedule and worried it was more than Ruby and Angus could handle alone. If she was riding with them it would be easy, but she wasn’t.

A fifth wheel trailer was purchased for the new maintenance manager and placed behind the where the second barn would be. The whole team was going to Scotland for Hogmanay and Claire wondered when Jaime would hire the person who would take charge in their absence.

“Jaime, have you advertised for the maintenance manager position yet? We all vacate the property in three weeks.”

Jaime had just stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his middle reaching for his razor. “I have hired someone I think will be perfect. Dougal’s nephew. He landed in the US yesterday. Fresh off the farm in Scotland.” Jaime’s burr became very pronounced whenever he talked about Scotland.

“Ye ken Sassenach, the lad wants fortune and glory in America. Dougal will keep him on the steady while we work him nearly to death, unfortunately. He has experience in construction and if he’s half what Dougal claims him to be, we have another Ruby in our crown.” He smiled brightly and ran his hand down Claire’s naked back and butt.

“Claire I”, he watched his hand run all over the back side of her and his eyes were burning suddenly. “I…am,” he brought his hand up her back to wrap his fingers around her neck and pull her up to his mouth where he kissed her deeply and bit her neck.

Claire gasped at the bite and clung to his shoulders until he picked her up and laid beside her on the bed. “It’s Saturday mo chridhe and I would like to detain ye from, well, everything and everyone. Anything pressing for you love?” He looked at the desire in her eyes and her chiseled body wiggling next to him. “I take that as a no. I must warn ye, it’s been too long since I felt ye shiver and grip me love. You need to buckle yer seat belt and no try to stop me because I’m comin for ye.”

The way he took possession of her and claimed his right to her in whatever manner he chose made her shiver with arousal. She craved this Jaime. Raw, needy, and hungry. Her fatigue had curtailed the daily release they were used to and the sexual energy was palpable.

Jaime sent her flying twice in her favorite ways and watched her sweet mouth pull him in with a gasp. While Claire was busy Jaime reached between her legs and put something cold and wet on her heat. He lifted her mouth to his in the very second she fell apart. “Oh…. oh… oh! God it’s hot Jesus I love this stuff. She spoke into his hungry mouth and pulled his hand to her.
She wanted his fingers and hands and cock, and God this was intense for her. She felt Jaime pull her to her feet when she was panting for him. He wrapped her shortest robe around her and walked her down to the kitchen.

“Let’s cook love!” Ye look starved like ye might fall over.” She stood in the middle of the kitchen and regarded him through slit eyes. Her body was on fire and she needed friction. She watched Jaime’s naked body bend and flex pulling food from the frig. She licked her lips and ignored his voice because her world was reduced to a body part smaller than her fist. She walked toward Jaime like she would shred anything in her way.

Jaime gently twisted her hips toward the stove and dropped sausage into the pan to sizzle. He put a fork in her hand and a bowl of beaten eggs in front of her before he gripped her hair and assaulted her neck pressing his concrete erection into her back. Claire couldn’t take it anymore. She lifted her robe and pressed her round butt into him reaching under her to guide him into her. Jaime grabbed her hips and thrust deep into her body. Pressing her upper body down he pushed into her over and over. Jaime stopped and pulled Claire up to kiss her.

Food was piled on plates and Claire was seated, forcefully. She picked at her food and watched Jaime move and consume his breakfast. The Kuma Sutra gel made her forget she was anything more than pulsing heat and this interlude was inhumane she decided.

Jaime looked into Claire’s whiskey eyes and felt a quivering in his stomach. Hie Sassenach was hypersexual, very raw, and very aroused. She would burn the table between them to get what she needed. It was so intensely sexy that Jaime, for once in his life, abandoned food and carried her upstairs where she screamed and clawed him reaching three more orgasms while he pinned her and pounded her finally groaned loudly and exploded deep inside her.

When he could breathe again, he pulled her under his chin and wrapped his arms around her. “My God, Sassenach, you are so much fun.”

Joe Abernathy closed the practice during December so he and Gayle could travel and enjoy the holidays. Claire was grateful for the time off so she could sleep more, help with the barn improvements and mostly, to work with Ruby.

Claire and Angus each gave her a formal lesson five days a week. Ruby had to take over the showing for Claire and a lot of effort was spent on getting her ready.

Claire watched a very good looking man wander through the barn looking around. After five minutes he walked toward Claire in the arena. He was absolutely striking she thought.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for Jaime Fraser. Is he around I have an appointment with him today.”

Claire loved the sound of a British accent and this gentleman made her quite curious. “I am Claire Beauchamp, Jaime’s fiance.” She held out her hand but couldn’t miss the man’s face fall for a moment. “He will be back in five minutes. And you are?”

“My name is John Gray. An old friend.” I spent many days in this arena when he first started and stayed as his rider until last year.” I left under bad circumstances so I was happy when he extended the olive branch.”

Claire’s mind was spinning and she did her level best to keep smiling. Something about John Gray made her very uncomfortable. When Jaime called to John she watched his face change to, what was it? Nerves, excitement, happiness, joy? It was more than that and her discomfort grew. She wondered why John was here and why she hadn’t been told about him.
Claire turned back to Ruby, pointed to eight jumps and asked her to double her speed. She sat down on the top of a jump and witnessed an absolute disaster. The horse went deep for every jump, ruby got left behind for all of them, popping the horse in the mouth for a short landing, poles went flying and Ruby’s foot went clear through the stirrup. “Oh my God” she mumbled, “what were we thinking.”

While waiting for Jaime, Claire worked on Jag’s tail making eight equal sections that she braided all the way down. She stuffed the braids into a bucket of water to soak them through before squeezing the water out with a big towel. Jaime and John had been talking for over an hour and she wondered if she should just go home. An hour later she walked up the hill with Pup, feeling left out of Jaime’s thoughts for the first time. He would clear it all up when he got home. At nine that evening she laid on the lounge with a plaid over her shoulders and looked at the barn and the single light on in Jaime’s office.

She was getting furious with Jaime. In her mind, she knew it was completely unwarranted but she felt the cold emptiness of neglect she lived with for four years. She didn’t like herself at that moment and Jaime even less. She went to bed.

Claire felt Jaime pull her to him and glanced at the clock. It was eleven-thirty and she felt the panic in the pit of her stomach.

Jaime cuddled her, “I’m sorry mo chridhe, I lost track of time playing chess with John.”

Claire kept her back to him and stayed silent. She was struggling with emotions that might be completely inappropriate. She would wait for a clear head in the morning before letting Jaime see her insecurities. She heard his breathing change as he fell into sleep. Claire would not be so lucky tonight.

Claire watched Jaime the next morning with bloodshot eyes and a heavy heart. Sometime in the night, she identified what bothered her most about John Gray’s visit. The odd energy she felt from him was foreign and heavy with emotion, but for what? Secondly, Jaime acted completely out of character last night and that made her insecure.

To Claire, it felt like John had pulled her out of the front seat, got in, closed the door, and off they drove. She moaned, “get a grip Beauchamp, you’re being ridiculous.” She did not want to face the day so she went back to bed and slept.

Jaime knew he hurt Claire’s feelings and it was the last thing he wanted to do. He expected John to stop by and talk for a bit about eventing for him. Jaime already knew Ruby would never be ready to tackle the open field jumping. She would show dressage and hunter-jumper this year and maybe do some beginner level eventing next year. John was ready to go now and he helped Jaime sell horses. Not like Claire, but a close second.

Jaime did not expect John’s confession of love, or the nightmare that Laoghaire put him through, or the enduring feelings he had for Jaime. It was the absolute last thing he expected. He had seen many women confess their love for him and though it was unrequited and uncomfortable to hear when John said it with his heart on his sleeve and eyes heavy with love Jaime’s heart broke for him.

John emptied his heart of all the feelings he kept to himself all those months working side by side. Jaime kept thinking it would end and he could grab Claire and hold on to her until she wasn’t hurt anymore. But he couldn’t get up and interrupt what was clearly a heart-wrenching confession.

It was Jaime’s weakness. When two people reached for his help at the same time he could easily become immobilized and just do what someone needed at the moment knowing someone else was
feeling abandoned. Now Claire felt abandoned and he wanted to kick his own ass for it. He looked up at the house and saw Claire laying in the lounge reading. His eyebrows went up and he took off for home.

Claire heard the back door open and her heart started racing. She wasn’t ready to see Jaime defend himself for spending half the night with John. She hadn’t really figured out why it bothered her so much.

“Please love, move over for the one who loves ye more than life.” Claire looked up and felt his heavy heart. She moved over with haste. Jaime slipped in next to her and pulled her into him. Claire was so lonely for him she let herself feel the comfort of him like it was home. Jaime just held her for several minutes letting their closeness restore the other.

“I’m sorry I hurt ye Claire, truly. I want to tell ye everything that happened yesterday and when I’m done I’ll ask yer forgiveness.” Jaime talked for an hour and Claire understood why she felt so uncomfortable around John. Because he was in love with Jaime like she was. The pieces fell into place and Claire’s awareness grew into understanding. They both found their way back to love. It was the heart of everything.

“Mo ghraidh, can ye forgive me?”

Claire pulled his mouth to hers and kissed him with all the love she felt in her heart. She laid her head on his heart and felt the steady rhythm. So grateful for the peace she felt in his arms. This was a reminder to always trust first. Trust in him, trust in his love, trust in his promises, trust in their future.

A lesson learned.
Jaime and Claire enjoyed another hour of peace before the cell phone started ringing. They walked down to the barn to meet the new maintenance manager.

Shawn Mackenzie stuck out his hand. Jaime was happy to hear a burr fresh from Scotland and Claire smiled at his youth and eagerness. Shawn Mackenzie was introduced to the rest of the team, and when Ruby turned around to say hi Claire saw sparks fly between them. Uh-oh, she thought. Jaime and Shawn left to walk the property giving Claire time to visit with Sarah who was just coming into the barn with Ginger.

“Hi Claire, I forgot a second lead. I have a patient now and you might be interested in her therapy. Come watch if you want.”

Claire walked with Sarah and was introduced to a mom and little daughter Tiffany, about five years old.

“Are you ready to see your favorite horse today?” The girl shook her head vigorously and then stopped and looked at the ground. “It’s okay sweetheart, you don’t have to get up today. Whenever you’re ready. You don’t mind if me and mom go see Ginger, right?”

Claire heard Sarah calling her over. “Do you mind sitting with Tiffany for a few minutes. Her mom wants to walk with Ginger.”

“Oh course! If Tiffany doesn’t mind.” Claire smiled hugely at the girl and she shook her head yes. “Alright then. You ladies have a fun walk.” Claire sat on the ground in front of Tiffany and kept her company with questions about a cute little girl’s life. Tiffany enjoyed talking about herself, her dolls, her dog, and her brother, but she kept an eye on Ginger.

Claire was out of questions and started feeling weird so she talked about horses, something they clearly both loved. “One of my favorite things to do is walk Ginger.”

“Tiffany looked at Claire, interest piqued. What’s it like?”

Claire smiled brightly, “its like magic because Ginger has special training. She will never step on your foot or knock you down, and when you lean on her, she gives you a hug. Nothing is more special than a hug from a horse Tiffany. You should walk with her because she loves you.”

Tiffany looked up at Ginger, “I love her too.”

Claire asked, “can you hold your ears real tight like this?” She pressed her palms to her ears. Tiffany laughed and held her ears. Claire turned to the pasture and whistled signaling to Sarah to come back.

“Here she comes Tiffany.” The little girl looked at Ginger approaching and scooted forward in her chair. Her little feet were on the ground when the ladies came back. Sarah looked at her position and smiled.

“Tiffany, Ginger wants to walk with you is that okay?” Everyone held their breath as she straightened her little body on top of her feet. She took small steps and then held her arm out for Claire.

“What, um it’ll be okay, you go on to Ginger.”
Tiffany looked back at Claire and held her hand out. Sarah had pleading eyes and Claire took her hand. Sarah was speaking softly to Tiffany and handed her Ginger’s lead. She held a second lead attached to the other side. Once Tiffany kissed Ginger’s face about one hundred times she slowly walked forward and Ginger followed keeping her nose just above the little girl’s shoulder.

Sarah asked Tiffany if she was getting tired. The little girl did not want to stop and didn’t answer Sarah. Claire looked at Sarah over Ginger’s back and nodded yes.

“I think you have earned a ride back Tiffany. Do you want to ride Ginger?” Tiffany stopped and looked at Claire wide-eyed.

Claire looked at Sarah and saw her nod. “I can help you ride her if you want.” Claire wasn’t prepared for little arms to be raised to her, so trusting, so eager. She blinked repeatedly to boss back the tears. She lifted her onto Ginger’s back and Tiffany clung to her arm.

“It’s too high Claire! You come too!” Tiffany’s chin was shaking and it broke Claire’s heart.

“I’ll give you a leg up,” Sarah came behind Claire and whispered “thank you” into her ear. Once Claire was behind Tiffany the sweet child had the best thirty minutes of her life. Sarah split off to talk to the mom and Claire held the two leads while Ginger meandered through the huge pasture.

Claire was floored at Tiffany’s reaction to riding. She felt like Santa Clause making dreams come true and it filled her with happiness.

Jaime was deep in the pasture with Shawn when he caught sight of Claire and a small person in front of her on Ginger. Once his eyes focused on the distance he caught his breath at the sight of Claire’s face. Happy, relaxed, and something more he couldn’t quite name. It was a memory he wanted burned in forever. She was going to be the best mother and there’s the proof as if he needed any.

“Do you want to guide Ginger back to your mom Tiffany?” The child twisted around and almost slid off of Ginger. Claire calmly pulled her back up and showed her how to use the leads like reins. Tiffany drove the rest of the way back.

Sarah approached them with a huge smile. When she looked at Claire she took a second look at her serene face. “I’m not sure who to bill for this session. You or Tiffany.” She pulled Tiffany down and held her shoulders until she was steady. When she let go, Tiffany held her hand up to Claire and they held hands for a moment.

“It was so nice to meet you sweet child. I know Ginger will miss you.” Claire looked dreamy.

“Well, it looks like you just swallowed a bottle of Prozac but could you get Ginger to her stall while I say goodbye?”

Claire put Ginger up and whispered her thanks. Then she went to the supply room for three apples. When she slipped into Jag’s stall her heart hurt. Someone had to ride him in her absence but Angus and Ruby both declined for some reason. “Jag you need to act dumb and small and not so ready to run. No one will ride you looking all fierce. Please act tired, for me. It’s hopeless, isn’t it? C’mon I’ll turn you out for the night.” Claire led Jag out of the stall just as Jaime slipped around the corner.

When Claire walked back into the barn she felt a hand grab her arm and pull her into the dark tack room. He pushed her against the wall and pulled her chin up to him. Jaime looked into her eyes, “I hope it’s a lass that has long black hair like her mother’s.” He ran his finger along her jaw and kissed her so sweetly. “I love ye Sassenach.”

A large dark figure approached the tack room and collided with Jaime in the dark. Shawn was
shocked and dropped the saddle he was carrying then tripped trying to get out of the tack room. Ruby happened to be walking in that direction when Shawn spilled out of the room and onto the ground. She screamed and ran to help him.

“What in God’s name is in there?” She looked horrified at the door expecting a monster to show itself. Instead, Jaime emerged mumbling apologies towing a hysterical Claire behind him. Shawn got up and retrieved the saddle to put it away. He was tall, over six foot she estimated. His hair was black and his face looked like James Dean she thought. He was beautiful to Ruby and her head swam being near him and alone. She did the only thing that felt right. She ran away while his back was turned.

Claire was heading home and passed Sarah in Ginger’s stall. Sarah’s head was leaned against her back like Claire used to do and her eyes were closed. “Downloading your hard day into a sturdy back are you?” Sarah’s eyes opened and she smiled at Claire.

“Thank you for what you did today. You couldn’t see it but I was jumping up and down in my head when she stood up. It was a hand of God moment Claire facilitated by you.”

Claire thought of Tiffany and her whole body felt like butter pecan ice cream for some reason. “It was magical, that ride we had. Not a word was spoken.” Claire shook her head and pushed back the tears that burned her eyes. “My pregnancy hormones are making me emotional all the time. Sorry.”

Sarah smiled at her friend, “maybe you should have gone into psychiatry Claire. You still can.”

Claire wanted to talk to Sarah about her dress but she was too tired at the moment and bid her farewell to climb the street and fall into bed. Her level of fatigue astounded her and she looked forward to the next trimester when her energy would return. At least she hoped so.

Jaime closed the front door quietly thinking Claire might be asleep. She wasn’t in the bedroom, or study, or kitchen. He looked out the back door and found her curled up on the lounge snuggled into her plaid. He looked at the food she was preparing and decided it was above his skill level so he put it all away and headed out for chicken in a bucket.

He nuzzled Claire’s neck and called her name quietly. She moaned and stretched before pulling him down to her so she could snuggle under his chin. “What is that smell?”

“It’s chicken, the kind you…” he watched Claire launch from the lounge and run into the house with her hand over her mouth. He handed her a wet hand towel and a glass of water. “I wish I could bear this burden for ye love. I’m so sorry yer sick.” He helped her clean herself up and walked her back outside. She was clammy and beads of sweat were all over her forehead. Claire sat down with a deep sigh.

“I want a rocking chair Jaime. Will you buy me one?” Her head was back and her eyes were closed. She looked ghostly pale so Jaime picked her up and carried upstairs to bed. He carefully pulled her clothes off and slipped on her favorite t-shirt of his and bundled the pillows behind her. He laid next to her and although she was already asleep he cuddled her. “One for every room love.”

Claire’s eyes popped open at five in the morning, like always. She went to the window and saw Jaime warming up. She squinted against the glass. It was very dark, even under the lights but she knew something was different. She ran for the field glasses and focused on Jaime. She lowered the glasses and let out a gasp. Taking up her whole field of vision was Jag’s head. Neatly tucked as his body flexed under Jaime’s command. She was so excited to see him sail over jumps looking fit and able. Her heart nearly came out of her chest when Jaime directed him to a jump five foot high and five foot across. Jag’s ears flicked forward and he left the ground, his entire body suspended over the
object in mid-air and then a superb landing. Claire lost it and jumped up and down like a cheerleader. She quickly raised the binoculars to see the rest of his ride.

Claire set this day aside for shopping and her first OB-GYN visit. She chose a doctor recommended by Sarah and was excited about all things baby. She was not excited about looking for a wedding dress however. She didn’t know if she wanted traditional white, or a veil, or a train. She often missed the assistance of a mother and today it was keenly felt.

Claire had spoken to Jenny several times, always a quick hello during one of Jaime’s calls. She calculated the time difference and picked up her phone. Jenny answered like she was out of breath but when she realized it was Claire her voice warmed and slowed down. Claire could hear her smiling across the thousands of miles. “I don’t know what to shop for Jenny, for a wedding dress. Will it be casual, or fancy, or what?”

“This will take a while so get comfortable on the couch a nighean.” She cleared her throat. “In Scotland, a wedding is known as the bride’s day. It once signified the transfer of ownership of a girl from father to husband, like chattel. There was a small window of time between father letting go of the maid and her saying the vows. For that brief time, she is free, in spirit anyway. Who do you want to be in that moment, Claire?”

“I’m always just me,” Claire said laughing.

“Yer missin my point lass. The wedding, from the guests to the decorations, to yer bonnie dress should reflect who ye are inside. Jaime will lead for the rests of your lives, like it or not,” Jenny grunted at that. “It’s the brides day and yer dress should be whoever you are, only fancy. Go to the bookstore and buy every bridal magazine they have. It’ll save yer feet, ken? You can look at every style, designer, and theme there is on the planet.”

“Theme?” Claire asked timidly.

“Yer gettin mud in the water again lass. Stick to findin the dress ye will save in the attic forever because it means that much to ye. If ye show up in ridin boots I’ll drag ye hide to the bridal shop and no give any choices, ken?

“But Jenny, even if they’re really shiny?” The women laughed through ten more minutes of sacred conversation before the “canna waits” and “see you soons.” Claire felt an overwhelming appreciation for Jenny and a deep love for her ever expanding family.

A short time later Claire dropped into the study sofa and started flipping through bridal magazines. She feared too many options but in reality, she didn’t like any of them. She flipped through the fourth magazine and was getting nervous about her choices. When she turned another page, there it was, the most perfect dress ever made. Claire’s eyes were wide and a smile to match. She jumped on Jaime’s laptop and googled the designer in Mesa. The picture was torn out and neatly folded before it was dropped into her purse.

The bridal shop was in Phoenix and Claire found it easily. The store seemed empty when she walked in. “Can I help you?”

Claire spun around. “I am getting married and found this dress and your shop carries this designer. Do you have anything like that here?”

The woman studied the picture. “I don’t have anything like this… I have exactly this!” She was smiling at Claire. “Come this way.”
Claire was shown into an enormous dressing room with her chosen dress and several more designs were brought by assistants. Claire tried to put her arms through it, then her legs, but could not figure out how the thing went on. She heard a light tapping on the door and asked for help.

The assistant walked in to find Claire hopelessly tangled in the dress, her ponytail had come undone and her hair was in her face. Claire tried to look through her hair at the woman. “I, uh, I don’t, um.”

The clerk took charge and quickly attached the buttons and clasps. She asked Claire to put her hair back up before she turned around. “You look stunning in this dress,” she said.

Claire turned around and her breath caught. She turned and looked feeling like a princess. The clerk moved the huge mirrors and turned her slightly so she could see the back. “The back is the exciting part of this dress.” From her shoulders, the fabric fell into folds at her waist leaving her back bare. Crystal ropes were attached to both sides of the back swooping deeply and moving with her movements making the crystals sparkle.

“It’s perfect. What is the price now that I’m in love with it.”

“The dress is only five hundred! But you’ll be needing some other things perhaps. Let me mark the hem. What height shoes will you be wearing?”

After the fitting Claire chose beautiful silk thigh high stockings, a garter, and a hand made shawl to keep her bare back warm after the ceremony. Her excitement carried her through finding the dress but when she drove home her eyes would not stay open. She would surely crash if she couldn’t wake up. She called Rupert.

“Ah, no lass I canna come after ye and don’t start cryin and makin it hard for me. No! Dinna cry lass I’m comin, tell me where ye are.”

Claire’s head kept falling forward when she would doze. Where is Rupert she wondered. Finally, she saw his little truck turn into the parking lot and Jaime got out.

“Well, looks like a new mother is fit for a long nap,” he said smiling at her. Move over a bit Sassenach and I will get ye right home. She was annoyed at Rupert lying to her but very happy to see Jaime. She was asleep in his lap before traffic would let him turn onto the road.

Jaime played with Claire’s hair and stroked her arm and back. He couldn’t wait to show her around the Highlands and get her away from the barn for ten days. When they got back the construction would start on the new barn. The jumps would…

Claire bolted upright, “holy shit! I have an OB-GYN appointment in twenty minutes…downtown.” Jaime got off at the next exit and was actually happy to go with her. In the waiting room, she kept falling asleep on his shoulder and he shifted his position to make her more comfortable.

When Claire’s name was called Jaime woke her and they both were led into an examining room. Jaime stayed right next to Claire while the nurse asked her dozens of questions about her medical history. He stayed during the pelvic exam and just held her hand.

"Please keep the gown on for just a couple more minutes. The nurse will be in to take some measurements. If we don’t see anything to the contrary your due date is June 15th. He shook Jaime’s hand and squeezed Claire’s.

The door opened and the nurse pushed a large machine into the room. Jaime pressed up against the wall to give her room.
“What is this?” Claire asked. “I mean I know it’s an ultrasound but what for.”

“We are going to measure your baby and show you all the body parts. If you want, I can tell you the sex, it’s up to you.”

Claire was incredulous. She felt ice cold gel squirted on her stomach and the nurse brought the wand down to spread it around. Once she found the baby she clicked the machine and brought overlaying x and y axis lines to take measurements. This went on for five aching minutes and then she changed the resolution and brought the screen closer to Claire and Jaime.

Claire felt like she was in a dream looking at the child within her. Tears rolled down her cheeks at the miracle she was witnessing. She looked at the head and legs and thought she saw an appendage on the lower body but decided that was impossible because her baby was a girl. At least in her head.

“Do you want to know the sex?”

Jaime looked at Claire with yes eyes. “Yes, please.”

“Looks like your having a girl you guys!” The nurse was very sweet and snapped three pictures for Claire to take home.

Once in the truck Claire looked at Jaime and asked if he was happy about a girl. He hugged her to him and said with honesty, “I can’t wait to have two of ye to love Sassenach.” The drive home was uneventful for Claire because she was asleep.

On the following Friday, they loaded four horses for show in California. Jaime wanted as much exposure as possible because this was a big buyer show. Ruby was showing dressage and hunter jumper, John Gray was eventing on the best of the four horses for sale. When they said goodbye to Shawn three trucks and two trailers headed for the freeway.

Claire spent the first hour texting Jenny including a picture of her wedding dress. “There are four inches of snow in Scotland according to Jenny.” Jaime smiled, he couldn’t wait.

“Claire, can we talk about John?” He looked at her. “I am so happy that yer pregnant, truly, but it leaves us without a rider and Ruby will no be ready for much this year. You said ye could be okay with John showing for us but I want to hear it again mo chridhe.”

Claire wanted to tell him exactly how she felt about John but she held her tongue. It would not help anyone to know how much she disliked that man. “I’m fine with John riding for you Jaime.”

Jaime pulled Claire to him, “lay in my lap mo chridhe. It’s another three hours and ye can sleep.”

Claire smiled gratefully. “I love you so much.”
Chapter 36

Claire watched Jamie walk with John to the field. The morning dressage test had gone very well and now he was preparing for cross country. Jamie and John had walked the course late in the afternoon yesterday. They were gone for two hours and thirty-five minutes. Even if it killed her, Claire was sorry she didn’t go with them. Claire looked at John’s handsome face and the way he looked at Jaime. She really did not like that man.

Two horses came to a stop on either side of her and Claire’s heart rate shot up. It was the barbie bitches.

“Sissy, I heard Jamie’s cousin here is pregnant so she can’t ride. I’m surprised he even brings you now that you’re worthless to him. And who is that beautiful man with him, ah, the one that took your place?”

“I will have a name and number before the show ends, Cammie. For all the women who have tried, cuz, I gotta respect that you found a way to get pregnant. How did you do it?”

Claire moved in front of both girls and theatrically turned around to face them. “Well, bitches, he can’t get enough of my tits, because they’re real, my hard body because we can fuck like champions, and the best thing he loves about me is my big sexy ass.” Claire twerked it a few times and pouted to the shocked girls. She started to walk away and suddenly whirled on the barbies. While its great fun to beat you, and shove your noses in my physical superiority, I hope you wake up soon and recognize how mediocre you both are. God, it must kill you both to have so much money and still be so completely forgettable. Have a nice day bitches. Claire saw Jaime walking toward her, thank God, and she went to meet him.

“Ye alright Sassenach?” He wrapped his arms around her and glanced at the girls. “Did they upset you mo chridhe?”

“I twerked for them and told them they were mediocre.” Claire waved at Rupert and walked toward him.

Jaime caught up with her, “wait, you know how to twerk?” His large hand rubbed her butt and he was completely entranced. How do you like me now bitches? She thought. Very happy with the impromptu encounter.

Claire looked up at his ice-blue eyes that sparkled in the sun. “You are so perfect Jaime Fraser.” She stood on her toes to kiss him soundly.

The show went very well. Jaime sold three of the horses and turned down an offer on the fourth. Not a bad weekend he thought as he stowed tack and gear on Sunday afternoon. He thought about pulling his horse out of the show next weekend so they could relax and get ready for their trip. By the time he started the truck his decision was made. No show next weekend.

Claire slept on his lap almost all the way home. Jaime was lonely for her. They had been hyper-sexual since meeting but they also spent a lot of quality time together. She slept so much now they rarely interacted and he craved her. Jaime remembered different times their lovemaking would span half the day and multiple rooms. He smiled to himself as he drove but soon felt a painful erection push against his jeans. “Oh God, this is gonna be a long trip.”

Jaime couldn’t keep his mind off of sex and his erection was getting painful. He tried to move
slightly but when Claire stirred he stopped. He felt her hands run up his leg, thigh, and grab him through his jeans. Jaime winced and let out a long breath. “I’m sorry mo chridhe, just ignore it.” Claire pulled his belt open and unzipped his pants. She wrapped her cool hands around him as Jaime's breathing became deeper. When she pulled him into her mouth he gasped, “Sassenach.” She had become quite good at pushing his heat and then backing off until he was near crazy. Jaime couldn’t keep his mind on the road and pulled off into a desert side road where he turned the truck off and leaned back. His whole world was a pulsing need and it was growing with intensity. Claire grabbed his balls and brought him up with her tongue running alongside of him as she pushed her mouth down his length until he was banging on the back of her throat. Jaime let out an animalistic gasp and exploded into her mouth. “God almighty,” he breathed.

Claire sat up and they embraced and kissed and whispered and laughed. And then kissed some more. Jaime turned the truck around and got back on the freeway, feeling much better.

There was so much activity packed into the next week time just raced by. Jaime spent extra time in the evenings with Shawn getting him ready to take over for ten days. Rupert flew home on Wednesday because his mother insisted on more time with her son. The barn sight was being graded and prepared for construction to start and Jaime watched closely at every stage.

John Gray was on a horse every day which was just short of intolerable for Claire. Jaime denied any arrangements other than showing and told her this happened last time John was riding for him. Jaime hated the way John made Claire feel and would cut him in an instant if they could manage without him. Fact was, they could not. He took a gamble with Vladimir’s loan and it would sink him in short order if he let one thing slip. Selling horses created income. He had to sell horses.

Claire sat with Jaime center arena one evening watching John jump. His horse was going deep to the jumps and Jaime made suggestions that clearly fixed the problem. “Much better!” Jaime yelled. Claire saw John’s head swivel toward her and a wide smile. It made her skin crawl. She had to do something or lose her mind.

John pulled the tack off the horse and walked it into the tack room. Claire was waiting for him. He nodded his head curtly but didn’t bother to smile. Claire figured his smiles were for Jaime’s benefit all along and now she was sure.

“What do you want from Jaime?” She asked.

“Same thing you want from Jaime Claire.”

Claire was dumbstruck, “I want marriage, a family, and a partner for life. Are you telling me you want that too with him?”

John looked directly at her, “yes, I want it all with Jaime.”

Claire struggled to wrap her head around what John was admitting. “You do know we are getting married in two weeks in Scotland, right?”

John leveled his gaze at Claire. “The reason I upset you so much is because you believe I could take him away from you. Something in you senses a competitor in the midst, therefore, there is an inkling of belief that Jaime might want me. Don’t look so surprised Claire. I feel it too, otherwise, I wouldn’t waste my time here having to smile at you. I already let one of his bimbo’s run me off, I’m not likely to make that mistake again.”

“Jaime is a heterosexual man. He cannot change his sexual preference, it isn’t possible John.”
“There are thousands of men living a life that was taught rather than desired. I believe Jaime is one of those men. So, who knows, a year from now he may be living with me in that house up there and writing child support checks to you each month. I have him for a year thanks to your baby. May the best man win.” He walked out of the tack room leaving Claire to wrestle with John’s truth.

Claire slipped into Jag’s stall and rubbed Pup’s ears when he woke him up. She pressed her body into Jag’s chest and cried. She just heard the most ridiculous and preposterous load of bullshit from John Gray. She now saw him as he saw her. The enemy.

On the eve of their departure to Scotland, Jaime held Claire and ran his fingers through her hair. “Tomorrow night we will be layin in the bed of my youth Sassenach. Every time I go home I am amazed at the simplicity, the age of the estate, and I feel the air is heavy with the souls of our ancestors. Fraser’s have lived in that house since early seventeen hundreds and the stories of the men and women who lived there are in the attic. I once read of another Jaime Fraser who occupied the house in the mid seventeen hundreds. He was a warrior like in storybooks and he fought in the battle of Culloden for independence from the English crown. He was an outlaw after that. It is written there is a cave in the cliffs where he hid out for months after the war. I would love to find it. I feel a kinship with him.”

Jaime turned on his side and saw Claire’s eyes. They looked tired but there was something else there. “What is mo chridhe?”

“I loved that story and I want to find the cave with you. I can’t wait to meet Jenny” Claire barely got through the last sentence before she was deep asleep. Jaime rolled to his back and smiled at the darkness thinking about the Jaime Fraser from two hundred and fifty years ago. He dreamed of him that night and the man was riding Donus. He was bloody from war but didn’t seem to notice as he made his way back to Lallybroch. He was watching the man in his dream. In the dark of night sitting next to a fire, the ancient Jaime suddenly looked up at him. Blue eyes to blue eyes. Jaime jerked awake, “ah diah!”

Claire took Pup to Sarah’s the next morning and brought in all his food, dishes, leashes, bed, and vitamins. “Honestly, packing for him is worse than for us.” Claire stopped on her way back out the door. “Sarah, can you fix me in five minutes?”

“Well, the pressure is on. What is broken?” She smiled at her friend.

“Something has changed in my relationship to medicine. I am dreading going back to work and it horrifies me. I’m thinking of dropping my schedule back to three days per week. What the hell happened to my desire to practice medicine?”

“Nothing happened to it. It just has some competition now. The great thing about schedules is they can be changed or changed back. You should trust your feelings and back off your schedule. You will still be a great doctor, just three days a week instead of five. There is your fix, now go before you miss your plane.” Sarah hugged Claire and promised to keep an eye on everything. Two minutes after closing the door Claire was back bringing sacks of treats for Jag, Fred, and Ginger. Then she was gone.

Jaime had Claire sit next to the window of the plane so she could see Scotland from every angle. Now that they were this close Jaime felt so lonely for his sister. At seventeen years old he taught himself to turn that part of his brain off so homesickness did not derail his plans. He allowed himself to feel it knowing they would be there soon. He felt tears pricking his eyes, I’m comin Jenny, he thought.

Claire slept almost the whole way there giving Jaime time to reminisce his days in Scotland. He
remembered Angus and Rupert playing war games when they were about eight years old. Riding out at noon to camp somewhere in the woods when he was twelve. Helping his da cut wood when he was thirteen, his mother planting herbs in her spring garden at every age. His life was rich in Scotland and his memories were so good. He looked at his sleeping lass. Nothing compares to the present. At thirty years of age, Jaime had lived every moment God had given him and his moments now were filled with love and expectation and Claire. The memories made now would trump everything.

Jaime rubbed Claire’s arm until she opened her eyes. “Are we here?”

Jaime inclined his head toward the window. “Take a look at bonnie Scotland mo chridhe.”
Claire directed her groggy eyes toward the window of the airplane and her breath caught. Scotland looked like an emerald in a sparkling sapphire sea. The depth of greens was fresh and beautiful. She couldn’t pull her eyes away from the sight getting ever closer. When she looked at Jaime there were tears in her eyes, “it’s beautiful.”

Jaime squeezed her hand almost overcome himself because it had been almost three years since he had seen his homeland. Seeing his sister was dominating his mind and emotion and she was close. I’m here Jenny, he thought.

As they progressed through the baggage claim area Jaime was scouting the crowd of people looking for his sister. He saw her smile first, then her bright eyes, then Ian next to her. Blue met brown and they communicated their joy and loneliness for each other long before they were close enough to speak. “There they are Sassenach.”

When they were in arms distance Jenny touched Claire’s face and welcomed her with a hug, failte air piuthar (welcome sister). “Jaime hugged Ian and slapped him on the back. He picked up Jenny if a tight hug and set her down. She looked up at him, “failte a chuir air a ‘bhraithe dhachaith (welcome home brother),” said through tears. Claire walked around with her hand out to Ian, “I’m Claire.” Ian looked at her with a beautiful smile and hugged her tight. “I ken ye to be a sister so its a hug for ye.”

Jenny grabbed Claire’s hand and pulled her to the door. “Let’s get this group home and see ye settled. I can’t wait to see yer dress!” Claire thought she might burst with the happiness she felt and the joy that surrounded them all.

Jenny climbed into the back seat with Claire and looked her over. “Yer a bonnie lass aren’t ye.” Her eyes sparkled and she bantered with Jaime about his fresh lass. “How do ye get yer skin to glow like that?”

Claire blushed deeply, “it’s the only physical benefit to pregnancy so far.” They had waited to tell Jenny and Ian about their amazing news and the car suddenly went quiet.

Jenny blinked several times looking into Claire’s eyes for truth. “Sweet Jesus, ye’ve a bairn comin then?” When Claire nodded yes Jenny erupted in joyful Gaelic that made Jaime laugh from the front seat.

When Ian turned down a dirt road Claire was all eyes. She took in a natural rolling landscape covered in snow. It took her breath away. When Lallybroch came into view she felt transported in time. The stone construction was something she had never seen and the numerous chimneys looked like there was a fireplace in every room. Ian parked and Claire looked up at a three-hundred-year-old home, quite overcome with historical significance to Jaime’s family. She saw a little boy standing at the open door watching his mother.

“Come meet ye namesake mac gradhach,” Jenny called. “This is ye uncle Jaime and aunt Claire.”

The little boy looked up at Jaime like it was the highest thing he could see. Jaime knelt to get eye level with the child and scooped him up in a hug. The boy settled in Jaime’s arms like he belonged there and Jaime carried him into the house. Jenny put her arm around Claire and led her in to show her around.

The house had been retrofitted for plumbing and electricity through the years but she again felt
transported in time. The dining room was large with a huge table that looked like it might have fed the families through the ages. The central fireplace was blazing into a comfortable sitting room. A study off to the side and a large staircase swept into the upper level.

After putting their cases in his room, Jaime came bounding down the stairs and grabbed Claire falling into the sofa with her on his lap. She loved the change in him, so happy and boyish like he didn’t have a care in the world. His eyes sparkled and he kissed her sweetly.

Jenny put a glass of juice in Claire’s hand and motioned to the bar where the whiskey was kept for Jaime and Ian. “Relax, have a look around, make yerselves at home while I get some food ready.” Jaime ran upstairs and came rushing back with their coats, scarves, and gloves. He pulled Claire up and dressed her for an outing.

The mid-afternoon sun bounced off the snow making everything look very bright. Claire took a deep breath of cold, clean air and smiled. Jaime showed her the ancient buildings that were left, the lazy tower that gave Lallybroch its name, and the stables that still housed two horses and a goat. He told her how his da put him on a horse at age five and walked away to let the horse teach him how to ride. She loved the stories and asked lots of questions.

Jenny had prepared food enough for an army and was bringing plates to the table when she saw Jaime out the window with Claire over his shoulder. She smiled watching her brother in love, it was something she never thought would happen. He had lived quite a life up to this point and though he left the family to stay in America he was never a disappointment to her. To Jenny, he would always be larger than life. Her hero.

Ian held an ax out to Jaime, “put the lass down and put yer back into it.” Claire walked to the house and Jaime took over chopping wood until he was drenched in sweat from the growing pile. He brought an armful into the house with a huge healthy smile on his face. They all sat down to an early dinner and wee Jaime entertained everyone with his banter and silly faces at the guests.

Jaime and Claire brought them current with the news of the equestrian center and Ian was very impressed with Jaime’s decision to accept the loan from Vladimir. Ian worked as a financial analyst and Jaime prepared for a lecture. Ian was Jaime’s oldest and dearest friend. They had grown up together and Ian knew Jaime as a prepared risk taker. “I see yer still jumpin across the mighty cavern,” Ian said laughing. Claire looked at both men confused.

“Young Jaime had more nerve than any of us boys. In the summer we used to hang a rope on large branches and swing to the other side of the stream in various places. When it was verra hot we let go and fall in the water, ye ken? Once we hung a rope on the side of a divide too large for any of us to try. There was nothin but rocks down below and we named it the mighty cavern. Jamie felt a wild hair one day and grabbed the rope at a dead run. Made it to the other side without a scratch. Ye havna lost that side of ye Jaime!” Ian said laughing.

Jaime raised his glass, “no guts no glory.” He kissed Claire and wee Jaime laughed and pointed at him making the whole table laugh. “Ye must try it laddie! Kissin a pretty lass is what ye’ll live for one day.”

Wee Jaime looked at Claire who was seated next to him. He looked at her lips and puckered his fat cheeks leaning toward her. Through the clinging remnants of his hand fed dinner Claire found a clean spot and kissed him, making the boy squeal with delight. After that, wee Jaime demanded her kisses every day and she happily gave them.

After dinner, Claire helped Jenny with the dishes and clean up. Jaime and Ian put forth effort at becoming mildly intoxicated before venturing out to cut the Christmas tree. It was continuous
laughter coming from the study until they walked into the kitchen and announced they were ready. Claire watched them with fascination, once again seeing a light-hearted Jaime she hadn’t known. She was falling in love all over again and wanted to cover his face in kisses. He locked onto her eyes like he knew what she was thinking. With a gigantic smile, he winked at her. When the door closed behind them the laughter started anew and Jenny rolled her eyes.

“When them little boys come back with a tree we can trim it if yer up to it Claire.” Jenny looked at Claire’s face. “Are ye well Claire?”

“Yes! A little tired these days is all.” Claire blushed wishing she could have the energy to enjoy every second but she was actually dead on her feet.

“We’re done here. You go up and lie down in Jaime’s room. I remember the first part of my pregnancy when all I could do is sleep. I’ll have Jaime wake ye up when they get back.”

Claire found Jaime’s room and wondered if it had changed at all since he slept in it. She laid on his bed feeling very tired and relieved to have a nap. It took a few minutes before she was lost to her dreams of Jaime as a youth.

When she surfaced again she felt a large warm body wrapped around her nuzzling her neck and making her giggle. Claire rolled to her back and looked up his eyes so playful and so blue. “I love you.”

Jaime was in no hurry to get up. He stroked her stomach and looked in her eyes. “Kiss,” she said and he touched her lips with his playfully at first and then quite seriously. Claire panted for breath when he released her. “I am so happy ye are here with me mo chridhe.” We have time to explore, and make love, and talk about the future. Nine days with no horses!” he said laughing. “Well, the two nags in the barn out there are safe enough if yer up for a ride one day. We can go find a secret cottage on the edge of the property. I used to go there when I was a lad.”

Claire moved a curl off his forehead. “And the cave. Can we find that first?”

“Of course we can. It will warm up for a few days and then snow again on Christmas day. We can take advantage of the warm weather to explore.” He kissed her again.

“Jaime, how many women have slept in this bed with you?” It was folly to speak the question but too late by the time she realized the minefield she was walking through.

Jaime held his hand out and counted his fingers while mumbling. “No that was two at the same time, so that makes six, seven, eight, something like that.”

Claire sat up quickly, “you have brought that many women home?”

“No, they were brought to me and I had to endure sometimes two at a time.” It’s not a pleasant memory ye see I was maybe five or six years old and dinna have a say in the matter. They were cousins who came to visit. Now if yer askin about adult girls I have brought home the answer is one-sassy-Sassenach.”Followed by a kiss she felt from head to toe.

Claire looked up at a ten foot, perfect tree already fitted into the stand. There were a dozen or so boxes opened with their contents spilling out on the floor as wee Jaime dug into them. Jenny played a list of Christmas songs that were traditional and remixed. As the lights were attached and turned on everyone glowed with color. It was two hours before Jaime climbed a ladder and placed the topper on the tree. Three whiskeys and a glass of juice were raised in toast of their first Christmas together.

When Claire emerged from a hot shower she wore flannel pajamas that swallowed her. Jaime
laughed when she came into their room shivering in the cold air. Jaime rubbed her arms and let his big hands roam her body. “So soft Sassenach, it’s a shame they have to come off ye, but come off they will.” Jaime had built a nice fire that was pouring heat into the room. They sat on the bed and talked about the day, laughing quietly. Claire stopped shivering and smiled with her clean-scrubbed face and damp hair. Jaime never saw her so beautiful and he told her so.

Jaime pulled Claire down next to him and continued caressing the soft flannel. “Since yer to be a Fraser soon we should work on yer Gaelic, ken?” When you answer the question correctly I get to open one button.”Before Claire could object he asked, “what is the word for outsider?”

Claire giggled, “well, Sassenach, of course.”

“Yer a smart one aren’t ye lass.” One button was opened and she received a chaste kiss.

“What is the word for heart, as in my heart?”

“mo chridhe”

“Yer two for two Sassenach, I’m gonna have to make this harder. What is the word for girl?”

“Lass”

“What is the word for boy?”

“Lad”

“What is the word for yes?”

“Aye. I think you just wanted my buttons open because everyone knows those words!”

Jaime smiled and opened her flannel top exposing her breast. “Well, let us not dwell on the details.”
He ran his warm hand up her side and caressed her breast. “What shall we play for yer pants mo chridhe?” Claire laughed and brought his head down to kiss her senseless.

The next day Jaime and Claire tried to find the cave but were forced back to the house for a group shopping trip. Ian went with Jaime, and Claire with Jenny. Both Jaime and Claire were heading for a jewelry store, fortunately, there was more than one in Edinburgh. Jaime surveyed the bracelet case and asked to see a stunning tennis bracelet. Ian whistled at the price. “Do ye have that kind of money Jaime?”

Jaime touched the bracelet gingerly. “There is no kind of money for Claire Ian. This is our first Christmas, first trip to Scotland, our first baby, our first and only marriage. I want her to have somethin so special she remembers all those firsts whenever she looks at it. Oh, yes I have a little money saved.”

Jaime was a planner and knew what he wanted. It was an easy decision that left Ian speechless. Jaime tucked the box into his inside pocket. “What did you get my sister for Christmas?” Ian turned a bit red, “a new apron, and a cordless iron that is very fancy.”

Jaime scowled at Ian. Christ, ye havena been married long enough for those gifts. If ye havena any money to spend then get her silk stockings or a warm robe that she can’t wait to put on. Are ye daft?” It was like someone gave Ian permission to spoil his wife at Christmas and after two hours of buying things for her, Jaime mentioned he might save something for next Christmas.

Claire and Jenny looked over hundreds of wedding rings. In the end, she purchased a plain gold
band. The inscription said, Forever Yours.

While they were waiting, Jenny looked at Claire’s ring. “That is a beautiful ring. Did he do that himself?” Claire told her the story of Jaime proposing in the tube at a fancy party and how he bribed the elevator operators to hold people back and give them some privacy. Jenny had tears in her eyes, so proud of her brother.

When they all piled into the car Jaime slid in next to Claire and wrapped his arms around her in the back seat. It was an exciting day and he was so happy.

Tonight they would go to midnight mass because it was Christmas Eve.
Jaime’s eyes opened pre-dawn on Christmas morning and he stretched and smiled at the fun day ahead. He rolled toward Claire who was still quietly chasing her dreams. He rose and dressed as quietly as possible and slipped out the kitchen door making his way to the barn.

The first rays of the sun were stretching across the fields when Jaime rode into the woods. He took it slow so he could enjoy the crispy, special morning. He looked at all the landmarks that reminded him of his youth and felt joy at seeing every one of them. He moved a bit faster once the ground was illuminated looking for the old cottage. Once found, he turned back to wake Claire for the day ahead. Just before he could see Lallybroch it started to snow and grew heavier with each passing minute. He slid tack off the horse, fed and watered the animals and pitched straw into their stalls for warmth.

“Merry Christmas my friends,” he said quietly.

When he opened the door to the kitchen he smelled freshly brewed coffee and cinnamon rolls baking. Jenny came around the corner and nearly fainted at the sight of him. “By Christ, no ones been in my kitchen this early since ye last came and ye nearly scarit me half to death!” Then came the giggles and she hugged her brother.

“It’s time ye came out west to visit me Jen. So, when are ye comin?”

Jenny observed her pushy brother, “it dinna sound much like a place I’d like to visit until recently. Ye really did build a room and bathroom just for me and Ian?”

“Aye, and I stocked it with all the fancy smellin stuff ye like,” Ye must come in winter though when it’s nice outside.” He smiled at her. “What do you think of Claire then?”

Jenny’s eyes went soft and she smiled. “I’d say that one was made just for ye. Never seen two people so well suited. I’m so happy ye found each other because I dinna think ye would ever fall in love. Where did ye meet her?”

“I caught her sleepin in one of my stalls one night. Curled up in a corner like she belonged there. I pulled her out and she was not happy about being woke.” He laughed at Jenny’s expression, “it was her horses stall, ye ken. She had driven across the country alone, haulin two horses and it was her first night in town with no place to stay.” He smiled. “For me, it was probably that very night seein her beautiful face under a blanket on my couch or the next night when she got lost in the dark, or when she strode up to one of my greenies and rode better than anyone I have seen in Arizona. Somewhere in there I fell hard and fast for her.

“Drove to Arizona alone did she. Where’s her family then?”

“No family” Jaime answered. Parents are dead, no siblings, no extended family. She was raised by her uncle when her parents died at age five. Most of her life was spent on archaeological digs in remote deserts and jungles. Her uncle brought her back to the states when he was ill. Enrolled her in public school. She was sixteen.”

Jenny’s eyes were huge. “Well brother, I knew it would take a special lass to catch ye but I’d say she might be one of a kind.”

Jaime stood and stretched. “Claire is kind, compassionate, so brave, a great cook, she loves me, and she loves to have sex. I couldna made a better girl from scratch. Hey little man!”

A sleepy wee Jaime wandered into the kitchen with his blanket and reached for his mother. He put
his head down under her chin and sucked his thumb.

Jaime felt his heart grow watching them and could not wait to watch his wife hold their bairn next year on Christmas morning. He excused himself to snuggle with Claire before the opportunity was lost.

Jaime slipped into bed and wrapped around Claire running his hand up and down her leg. She flipped over to face him and asked for a kiss but her hair was hiding her face. She tried to blow it out of the way and Jaime took action and pulled it all behind her ears. “Merry Christmas Claire.”

Claire’s eyes shot open and she bolted upright in bed. “It’s Christmas! We must get up and get ready for presents and stuff. C’mon!”

Jaime watched the Tasmanian devil pulling out clothes, and grabbing toiletries before running out of the bedroom. Two minutes later she ran back and grabbed Jaime’s hand, “let’s go, hurry.”

Jaime had to hold her arms down to stop her from madly soaping both of them. He poured shampoo on her head and gently massaged her scalp before leaning her head back to rinse. As soon as he let her go she was all arms, two-fisted soap, looking for flesh to wash. “Claire?”

She stopped at looked up at Jaime, “hmmm? Oh, we’re done.” She stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel.

Jaime considered her bizarre behavior. She was so excited but it couldn’t be the gifts alone. She was a woman of means and could buy anything she wanted. No, it was more than that and embarrassing enough that she didn’t share it with him. “What is yer hurry lass?”

“We don’t want to miss it!”

“Miss what?”

“Christmas! So let’s go. I have gifts for wee Jaime and Jenny and you and Ian. I’m going to put them under the tree.” Her smile lit up her face and she was gone.

Jaime wondered if this was her first traditional Christmas. When her uncle died she moved into the Boston house where she lived alone until Frank moved in. Oh God Sassenach, did you spend all those Christmas’s alone in that house? He struggled with the truth of it, his heart broke for her. “My poor Sassenach,” he whispered.

Everyone gathered in the great room and presents were passed out. There was eggnog, hot chocolate, rolls and fruit on the table along with a bottle of brandy to spike whatever someone wanted.

Claire watched everyone. The smile never left her face and she ran for whatever anyone needed. Jenny finally told her to sit and open a present. Jaime noticed her hands were shaking as she dug into the wrapper.

Jenny was over the moon by the gifts from Ian and he beamed while she praised him. Wee Jaime was in excitement overload from all the new toys. Claire moved some spent paper off the couch and felt a small box. It had her name on it so she opened it. She stared at the bracelet for a full minute before lifting her eyes to Jaime but she said nothing just stared at the bracelet again. Jenny walked over and looked inside the box she held.

“Holy Saints that’s a beautiful bracelet! Let’s put it on ye!” It was clasped around Claire’s wrist and the sparkles could be seen from the kitchen according to Ian.
Claire got up on her knees to be eye to eye with Jaime and kissed him long and sweet. “I love it.” She locked eyes with the man she loved until a small fist was bumping her leg. She looked down at wee Jaime all puckered up for a kiss, which she gave, making him squeal.

Claire held a small box out for Jaime. He opened the lid and saw a picture of a Hermes Cavale saddle. It was his favorite saddle and one he planned to own someday. He closed his eyes and smiled because he would never have such a magnificent saddle if not gifted. He was too practical for such extravagance.

“And this too.” Claire handed him another box. Inside was a picture of the matching bridle.

Jaime scooped her up and kissed her, “thank you Sassenach.”

The rest of the day was like a dream to Claire. The men sat in front of the television watching football and drinking whiskey. She and Jenny went to the table to plan the final details about the wedding only two days away.

“So much celebration in ten short days, I won’t know what to do our mundane lives when we get back.”

Jenny looked up at Claire with raised eyebrows. “I’m not much for gamblin but I’d wager your lives are anything but mundane.”

When carolers were heard outside Jenny ran to the door. “It’s a sleigh ride and it’s still snowin, who wants to go? Wait for us!” she shouted to them. The women hastily poured hot cocoa into a thermos, stuck the brandy in a coat pocket, threw scarves around everyone, bundled up wee Jaime until only his little eyes could be seen. The five of them were welcomed onto the flatbed heaping with hay and off they went to sing house to house while the snow came down around them.

Claire snuggled into Jaime’s chest and she closed her eyes so full of peace and happiness. “How did ye like yer first Christmas mo chridhe?” He asked in her ear. She gasped and turned to look at him as her eyes welled with tears. “Oh, Sassenach, I dinna mean to make ye cry.” He pulled her back into his chest, “it was just like I thought it would be, wonderful.” Sometimes Jaime’s statements summed up years of her pain and said I know, and I’m sorry this happened to you. However this fairy tale existence happened she would relive all the loneliness for this ending.

Jaime wondered what the holidays were like after Frank moved in with Claire. Obviously not the festive kind. He would leave those memories gathering dust in her mind, soon to be gone forever he hoped.

Later that night, Claire came into the bedroom shaking with cold as she did every night. Jaime had a roaring fire going and she was soon warmed to the bone. Jaime noticed she didn’t seem as tired today, in fact, there were no naps at all. He watched her sit on the floor in front of the fire and pull a comb through her wet hair. In two days she would be his wife, a decision he never doubted.

“Sassenach yer three months pregnant, why ye arena showin yet?”

“I am, see?” She laid back on the floor and pulled the flannel away. “See?”

Jaime couldn’t believe it. No doubt he missed it because he was pursuing other activities when her abdomen was bare. He laid next to her and put his hand over the tiny bump under her navel. “It won’t be long Sassenach.”

“Are you terribly tired, Jaime?” She looked up at his face.
“No mo chridhe, what would ye like to do, hmmm?” He nuzzled her neck until she giggled.

“Well, I want to talk about my work schedule because for some reason it just feels like too much right now. In fact,” she looked down at her feet and spoke quietly like she was ashamed, “I don’t love it like I used to and I’m worried about that.” To Jaime, this came out of left field and he listened intently. “I talked to Sarah about it and she thinks it’s just more competition for my attention now.” Claire took a breath and stared into the fire. “She suggested I back my schedule off to three days a week. It can always be changed back.”

Jaime listened quietly and nodded his head in understanding but that was his only input so far.

“I’ve thought about it a lot and I’m ready to do it. What do you think about that?”

“This would mean I spend more time with ye at the barn. It’s not fair I weigh in on this decision because I want ye at the barn with us, with me. I can’t be objective. Truth is, it’s different without ye. Not as much fun, not as much confidence in the team. Plus, I’m a selfish man and I want ye.”

“Not as much confidence in the team? What does that mean?”

“Well, I’ll have to change the names to protect the idiots, I mean innocent, ye see” He was creeping up on her using his best conspiratorial voice and pulling giggles from her. “There they are, Rupert, Angus and Ruby, all complainin and talkin at once and I’m about to split down the seam. Then ye walk in. They spin on their heals and go to you. Just like that.”

Jaime pulled her face to his. “I know you will take care of it. They know it too because we’ve watched ye spin so many plates in the air and never drop one. Men canna do it. If I had yer help an extra two days a week I wouldn’t feel so anxious about the expansion. Eight horses at a time are makin my head spin.”

“I hear a call to duty and I couldn’t be happier. Thank you for your input. I love you.” She sat up and kissed Jaime. “Now I’m tired. I think I’ll crawl over there to the bed. Jaime scooped her up and laid her on the bed. When the light was turned off the fire danced on all the walls around them.

Claire leaned toward the mirror and applied her make up as Jenny fussed with her hair. The downstairs was decorated with silver and white with candles waiting to be lit all over the great room. A few of Jaime’s lifelong friends were coming and other than that it was just the family. Jaime thought Lallybroch was a better choice than a cold church they had never been to.

Jenny pulled Claire’s hair in many different directions leaving other sections to fall in ringlets down her back and wispy sections around her face. “I thought ye were bonnie before, but Claire, ye are breathtakin.”

When Claire stepped into the dress and Jenny did the buttons and clasps she felt transformed into a princess. Jenny put her bracelet on and a final spray of her hair. “Are ye ready to marry my brother lass?”

Claire kissed Jenny’s cheek, “thank you for all of this, and helping me get ready. You have made all my dreams come true this week. I love you Jenny.”

They went down the back stairs and found Rupert waiting at the front door outside. He was dressed in a suit and his hair was combed straight back. His eyes were huge when he looked at Claire. He offered his arm. Jenny walked through the door first followed by a sight Jaime would not soon forget. His breath caught when their eyes met. Claire smiled shyly and he couldn’t wait to touch her. Rupert handed her to Jaime and backed up to sit down. Angus gave him a thumbs up.
There were candles lit all around the room and a huge fire in the fireplace. The guests were comfortable but it was tight. Jaime looked into Claire’s eyes and saw the sparkle he hoped would always be there.

Jenny handed Claire the ring to be blessed and she added it to the bible held out by the priest. When she said her vows her voice was steady and strong and she smiled at Jaime like her heart was going to burst.

Jaime watched his love and saw pictures of their life leading up to this moment. He saw her covered in wood shavings holding her blanket, red and puffy from sunburn, crying and hugging Jag, holding a dying Pup in her arms, naked on her fake bearskin rug, and her red lipstick smile. She was a runaway roller coaster since the day they met. Now here she was marrying him. She was absolutely stunning today and he was so proud.

When Jaime kissed her he pressed his forehead to hers and many people snapped that picture. They would choose that moment as their wedding picture to display because it was so intimate.

The guests came up to congratulate them after the ceremony. Claire was so happy for Rupert’s help in getting her to the altar. It was very strange to see them here all fancy and washed. Angus brought a date. A tiny sweet girl who easily consumed as many beers as they did.

Jenny was the perfect hostess and passed plates of finger food and filled cups with punch. Jaime was surrounded by his mates and Claire took a deep breath.

“Welcome to the family lass,” Ian said from behind the bride. “Ye make a fair bonnie bride I’ll tell ye.” He smiled brightly and hugged her gently afraid of damaging her beautiful dress. Jenny joined them with a hug of her own.

“We have a weddin gift for ye.” Ian dropped an envelope in her hand. It was a key tag like a hotel uses. “It’s a suite at the Edinburgh Inn and everything is taken care of, including the contents of the little refrigerator so ye might as well eat and drink it all.”

Claire was overcome with appreciation, as was Jaime when he joined them. “Thank you so much,” Claire said through her tears. Ian handed Jaime the keys to their car telling him he was off work until after Hogmanay so they should stay away until the maid came to clean up the room.

Jenny told Claire she had packed a case for both of them and included all the things they would need. She winked at Claire. “So, just shout goodbye to everyone and be on yer way!”

They did just that and were heading toward Edinburgh ten minutes later.
The front desk manager stared down at her ledgers and sighed. She was so excited when she landed this job, and now, after only eight months, she was suffocating from mundane, relentless, duties that never ended. She ached to get home and put her feet up.

Jaime cleared his throat bringing the tired managers eyes up. She took in the most handsome face she had ever seen, right next to a gorgeous woman blushing like a rose. Her eyes scanned their fancy clothes and the dazzling diamond on the woman’s hand. “Merciful heavens ye just been marrit?” Her eyes wide, she sucked her breath and smiled wide. “Aye, ye have, and both so bonnie! Congratulations!” Her fatigue forgotten, she looked at the sincere smiles from the newlyweds. Ye need a honeyroom, I, I meant a honeyroom, ah! A Honeymoon room.” Her face was red from excitement. She loved love and everything that went with it. A true Scot.

Jaime smiled at the woman and held up his room card. “We are just lettin ye know we’re here. Ah, thank ye. Which way is this room?”

The manager took the card and looked at the number. She threw it in the trash with great relish. “I manage the best hotel in Edinburgh and that authority gives me great pleasure at the moment. Just wait for one moment please.”

Claire held onto Jaime quite taken back by the gleeful manager. Jaime turned toward her and kissed her forehead. “It won’t be long mo chridhe, are ye well?”

“Never better, never ever better.” She leaned into his cheek. Claire felt something on her leg and looked down at a tiny human touching her. Enormous blue eyes stared up at her while sucking a pacifier. The child seemed quite taken with her and when Claire dropped to his level, the baby stared into her eyes and touched her face. She kissed his hand and the child giggled. A minute later she heard a woman gasp as she ran up and grabbed the baby.

“I am so sorry! But…I can see why he is so fascinated with ye, yer so beautiful!”

Jaime had been staring at Claire with the child feeling warm anticipation of the near future. He looked at the woman and she nearly fainted. She looked back and forth between them with recognition spreading across her face and eyes welling up with tears. She said in a hushed voice, “the two of ye just marrit. Congratulations, truly.” She turned and walked the baby back to her group.

Claire looked at her husband with sparkles in her eyes. “She is right, you are beautiful my love.” She touched his face wanting to cover him in kisses and let her body show him her love. Jaime read her face and looked for the manager who was rushing toward them.

“Compliments of the hotel we changed yer room to our very best!” She put a room card in Jaime’s hand. “No extra charge sir. Take the elevator to the sixth floor and turn right to the first door. It is all remodeled and yer the first guests. I hope ye like it.” She was thrilled to do her part with a room that would knock their socks off. Jaime and Claire thanked her for the hospitality and found the elevator as quickly as possible. They were in serious need of some privacy.

Jaime held Claire’s hand up to the sixth floor and they marveled at the view of Edinburgh out the windows in the hall. Jaime opened the door and held it open for Claire hearing her whistle and gasp. The room was actually a suite with a complimentary basket of fruit and chocolates. A bottle of champagne in an ice bucket and two flutes. Two thick terry robes were folded on the table.
“Wow,” Jaime was looking at everything with a huge smile.

Claire took his hand and pulled him to the other room. “You’ve got to see this amazing room.”

The back wall was nearly floor to ceiling windows with a magnificent view of Edinburgh and the evening lights coming on in all directions. “Wow,” he said again.

Claire teased, “I think I know what the thick robes are for. Look what’s on the patio.”

Jaime dropped his gaze to the upscale furniture and umbrella with tiny lights under it, then he saw it, a Jacuzzi that was covered to keep the water hot. Another “wow” and he looked for Claire who was stretched out on the bed sighing with comfort.

“Can we move into this room permanently please?” She looked like she was in heaven.

Jaime laid beside her and released all the air in his lungs, “oh God that’s good, really good. I’m afraid I have conflicting needs at the moment Sassenach. Did ye see the chocolates? I want to get in the Jacuzzi with my naked wife and stay right in this bed for a week. Ye have to help me choose mo chridhe.”

“I will help,” she said through giggles and walked around the corner bringing the basket and champagne with her. She looked in the little frig and pulled out two bottles of juice that were ice cold, and a brick of Scottish cheese. They tore into the food with empty stomachs. When Jaime’s mouth was completely full of food to chew he untwisted the wire on the champagne and popped the cork. He poured one glass and tipped it at Claire’s lips and she savored the taste that bubbled in her mouth even after she swallowed. Jaime finished the glass in one swallow and went back to eating. He gave Claire a bite of everything and kissed her each time.

By the time they were stuffed with chocolate and cheese, Edinburgh was dark and the lights sparkled below them. Jaime went onto the patio and removed the cover of the Jacuzzi turning the dials for forced air and heat. He felt the water and decided it needed to heat up a bit. The hotel had swept the snow away so only a few cold steps would be endured.

“I’m gonna get the case Jenny packed for us Sassenach, be right back.” He slipped out leaving Claire to look around the room and push buttons when she found them. She jumped back at the sliding door revealing a huge flat screen television. She pointed the remote and flipped through channels hastily going back a few. Her eyes were wide watching beautiful bodies have sex in the most unusual positions. She couldn’t tear her eyes away and found herself breathing deeper with each passing minute. She heard a bump on the door and switched off the TV pushing the button to slide the door closed again. She took a deep breath and walked outside to the Jacuzzi.

Jaime put the case down in time to see Claire bend down and touch the bubbling water. She reached behind her and the dress loosened very slowly as each button was released. Jaime was stuck watching. His mind was frozen as she continued. There must be a million buttons he thought. His hand swiped at the light switches and as the room went dark. She looked at him with smoldering eyes that caught his breath. He couldn’t remember the last time they had sex, but he couldn’t remember his own name at the moment. She stared at him while working the buttons and the dress slowly pulled away from her body. She reached behind her back and released the crystal strands and the dress fell to the ground. Claire stood in her heels, sexy stockings, and one tiny thong. She put her thumbs inside the elastic and pulled them off. “Jesus lass!”

Jaime was out of his clothes and in the water in under a minute. He looked up at her and she offered a foot while holding a chair for support. Jaime pulled off her shoe and reached up pulling the stocking off slowly. She offered the other foot and the shoe and stocking were removed. He looked
up at his wife’s naked body and thought he would explode before she entered the water.  
“Sassenach.”

Claire stepped into the hot water and let out a sigh as the bubbles covered her flesh. She pushed Jaime to the side. “Flex those gorgeous biceps.” He pushed himself up to sit on the side and Claire pushed her mouth around him while her hot hands gently held his greatest asset. Jaime was watching her and clearly running out of air as he expanded his chest nearly panting. He reached for her and slipped into the water pulling her into his lap, her back against his chest. He nibbled her shoulder and kissed her neck letting his tongue taste her skin.

Jaime pushed Claire to the other side where she could sit. He pulled one foot up and massaged it with his strong hands. Claire loved this and Jaime worked his way up her leg. He gave the same slow care to the other leg and saw his wife wiggle and struggle for composure when his hand neared her heat. He brushed her lightly and Claire gasped. She looked up at him like she would rape him if he didn’t stop her throbbing. Jaime looked down and smiled softly. Then he left.

Claire shook her head to clear her mind. If she didn’t know better she might think Jaime got out of the water and left her there. He stood at the stairs and held her fluffy robe open. He wrapped it around her and walked her to the bed where he laid her down, opened her robe and sucked her breasts until she screamed his name. He lifted her legs up over his shoulders and entered her wet warmth, trying to go slow until she dug her nails into his buttocks and pulled him in with all her strength. He looked at his beautiful wife completely undone, sexy, and demanding and he lost his resolve, thrusting into her until she gasped and arched into him. He held her hands above her head and waited for her to return fully, then he let it go. The Neanderthal was wicked with need and he turned her over and pummeled her, Turning her back again he held her hands above her head and bit her neck until she gasped. That stripped the last of his restraint as he held her pelvis up and pounded her until he exploded with a loud growl. When his body stopped jerking he collapsed next to her holding her hips to him and gasping for breath.

Claire looked at him with a shiver going up her spine. His hand went up her back crushing her to him. “Are ye all right love?” He panted. She covered his mouth in a kiss and broke it quickly so he could breathe. “Oh yes, very alright.” She purred. She was thrilled to see him like that and her body responded with interest. She went to fetch his robe and wrapped him in it pushing the pillows up on the headboard for him to lie against. She brought the basket back to the bed and filled his champagne glass. Then she cut several wedges of cheese and curled up next to him dropping one in his mouth.

Jaime looked up at her, “I have never seen such a beautiful bride mo chridhe, nor been so proud to stand next to ye. Stunning is what ye were.” She kissed him sweetly and grabbed the remote she put on the bedside table. She glanced at the clock and smiled. It was only eight o’clock.

Jaime actually held his breath to stifle the laughter swelling in his stomach. His little miss no-brake was working on something in her head, forgetting once again, her glass face. He coughed twice to gain some control before he gave himself away. This was just too much fun so he let it play out. My wee vixen is wanting more from me, he thought, and I am all in. He pulled her down next to him and kissed her neck. “I love ye Claire with all my heart. Can ye reach that light, it’s on yer side.” He turned on his side and buried his face in her neck to cover his smile.

“Light? Like turn off the light? It’s so early, only eight o’clock, too early to sleep.” She pulled his face out of her neck and saw his closed eyes. “I know, maybe some TV before sleep.” She pushed all the buttons until the door slid open and several other buttons to make the flat screen flip on. The porn channel was full of bodies in a group sex activity and she desperately wanted to watch it but flipped through the channels like she was looking for something more suitable. Every time she got to that channel she hesitated a few extra seconds before going through the channels again. “I can’t
decide what to watch,” she said with a forced laugh. Jaime feigned sleep to give her some artificial privacy and she lingered longer and longer on the porn channel.

Keeping his eyes closed did not block the sound of sex from reaching his ears and before long he was rock hard again. He pulled her hips closer and heard the TV snap off quickly. She felt his hands push her robe off her shoulders as he pulled her down on the bed. He got up to turn on a low light lamp so he could see what he was about to do. He leaned over her and kissed her mouth deeply testing her arousal and happy to feel her clutching his shoulders to pull him closer. She was panting for him as he flipped her over. His arm came under her and lifted her luscious rear in the air and growled to open her legs pushing her shoulders gently down to the bed. He looked at her soft, wet, heat and almost lost it. He took a deep breath and slid into her not expecting her to push back suddenly, driving him right into her cervix. He grunted and tried to slow down but she was having none of it. Her little body was pushing against him, growling her demands. He was more than happy to deliver her into the erotic release and grunted when her body latched onto him with pulsing waves that he thrust into until he joined her.

They cuddled and Jaime kissed her cheeks and eyes and nose holding her to him. She was exhausted and struggled to keep her eyes open. Before she slid away from him into her dreams, “Ye only get one weddin night mo chridhe. Was the day everything ye wanted?”

Claire pushed her face into his and mumbled something about a hat trick before her conscious mind turned off for the night. “I love ye lass.”

Hours later, Claire felt kisses under her arm that came around her ribs and dropped slowly down her stomach. She felt herself give in to her dreams until her leg was pulled up and prickly scruff scraped against her tender inner thigh. She moaned and pushed his head into her body as she arched her back. She wasn’t sure if she was dreaming and too tired to give in to the tease until she felt the cold wet dab of the gel on her delicate bud. “What?” She felt air blowing across her and fire came up to torch her into madness. “Ah, God, so hot.”

Jaime turned her toward the mattress and came up behind her locking her body into a spoon that he would take his sweet time piercing. He pushed into her and heard her gasp. His arm around her chest locked her to him and when he touched her she almost managed to break free so she could have what she wanted right now.

“I like it when ye fight me love.” He pushed into her mercilessly and she cried out. He wrapped his hand around her throat and pulled her ear to his mouth as he continued his assault. She struggled against him and he chuckled in her ear. This will take a while mo chridhe and I’ll release ye when I’m done not a second before.” He touched her again and she moaned for him to push her over the edge. He pushed into her slowly and pressed her further making her shake. He pulled her face to him and kissed her senseless.

Claire went out of her mind when Jaime went from slow agonizing strokes to thrusting her into. He held himself back with an iron will and reached for the little jar. There was a tiny bit left and he swiped the side and bottom getting it all on his finger. All the while pushing deep into his moaning wife. When he thought she could stand it he released her but held her in place dropping his head between her legs to rock her into an exquisite orgasm. He was back inside her before she came back to earth. Grinding into her, desperately wanting his own sweet release.

“I have a tiny bit of gel on my finger mo chridhe, do ye want more?” She moved away from him and he slipped out of her.

“Let me see it.” She swiped the gel onto her finger and smeared half on her palm before grabbing his erection and smearing it on him, the other she put on herself.
“It willna work on…” Jaime filled his lungs with air and pulled her writhing body under him. He puffed air and held her down for several minutes. His eyes were closed and he was sweating profusely. “Open yer legs” he managed to get out between gasps of air. He looked down at her and pushed her knees up in the air taking huge breaths. “I need a moment so I don’t hurt ye lass.” His head was a tornado of heat and lust, his entire existence reduced to his erection. He waited but made the mistake of looking at his wife spread open for him, arching her back from the fresh dab of gel. He panted, waiting for the intensity to subside enough for him to have control. When Claire’s finger ran across her heat… he growled and seized her hips burying himself inside her. The heat of the gel brought him so high he thought he might self combust. He kissed her deeply while thrusting and their stomachs slapped again and again until he pushed deep into her with a long groan and stopped. For several minutes he remained stock still and felt every pulse of ecstasy.

Jaime pulled the covers over them and cuddled his wife. “I love you so she coo’ed.” As the dawn broke over Edinburgh they both slipped away into unconsciousness knowing they were safe and loved in the arms of the other.
Hogmanay was an amazing experience for Claire. Like a giant extended family, the neighbors and friends that had come year after year poured into and out of the front door all afternoon and evening. They all brought food or a bottle of something to share and Claire drifted from one group to another enjoying the stories and the laughter. Claire kept her phone at the ready to snap pictures of Jaime, Jenny, Ian, and wee Jaime. There were over one hundred pictures by the end of the night. The last picture she took was Jaime and Ian passed out on the couch. She touched his face and asked if he wanted her to carry him upstairs.

Claire smiled with her distant look remembering the party the night before. The airport was crowded and noisy but as she flipped through the pictures on her phone she heard none of the chaos. Just lost in the memories. Jaime tuned it out as well. He fell asleep in the car on the way to the airport, at the ticket counter, and now in his seat waiting to board. Claire looked at her sleeping hero and her face was serene with the love she had for him.

She kissed his ear several times and whispered, “its time to board love.”

Claire insisted Jaime take the window seat so he could rest his head and sleep. In reality, she wanted him to see his beloved Scotland one more time as the plane lifted them back to their reality. She squeezed his hand because he was silently watching as the landmass disappeared.

When they were out of viewing distance Jaime was awake but still silent. He just stared straight ahead like his mind had left his body behind.

“I’ve been thinking about the future when we’re older, and the Center is a robust and thriving stop on the show circuit, with the foals commanding high dollar before they hit the ground. We have gray in our hair.” She nudged Jaime’s arm and looked at him. “Do you think we could build a small house on the estate grounds and live there half the year?”

Jaime smiled brightly and sat up, taking her hand. “Aye, we could! Get out of that infernal heat and live in Scotland!” He kissed her hand. “What a great idea Sassenach.” With that, his face didn’t look so sad and he was asleep in minutes.

Claire put her head back and closed her eyes. She could see Lallybroch, and their house nestled under the canopy of the tall trees, the house grew in size as she realized her children’s families could vacation there and learn about their heritage. The adults could get away leaving the children with loving grandparents. She saw Jenny, older and gray, with a houseful of kids and grandchildren, the ever-present dazzling smile and laughter from Ian. She looked around for Jaime with her mind’s eye and found him riding out of the woods on Donus with a small child in front of him. Watching herself, she was canning with Jenny and laughing, planting her herbs and flowers, rocking a child with a large book in her lap while she read. She smiled to herself and dozed on that memory.

Claire watched her hungover husband make the effort to walk to the truck. She didn’t have to fight him for the keys they were placed in her hand before she finished her offer to drive. She found his darkest sunglasses and put them on him before making her way back to the East Valley.

Getting close to their exit Claire felt a flash of anger. He had been evicted from her head for the past ten days. An unwanted guest that was barred from her thoughts and happiness. As she turned up Ironwood Drive, he was back, smug and sure of himself with a sneer of a smile. John Gray. She was going to stop his ridiculous assault on her piece of mind one way or another.
Claire turned into the driveway and took it all in. The new jumps were scattered throughout the cross country area and there were so many! She counted eight completed and three in progress. Wow, the kid was fast. She saw Sarah and Fred with a small group of people in the grassy pasture. Half the arena fencing was gone and a trough was being dug for the new posts to be cemented into. It was going to be enormous she realized. She shook her head and felt excitement boiling up in her stomach. Before she could twist the key and get out of the truck Pups head came into view, then gone, then back again, then gone. He jumped up to see her over and over again. She laughed and it woke Jaime up. He looked even worse than before and grabbed his head moaning.

“My darling, I am taking you home to bed and I will come back and check in on everything. But I need to speak with Pup or he will throw himself in front of the tires. One minute.”

Claire braced for a seventy-pound brown dog to crush her and then opened the door. Pup was crying as he weaved between her legs with his head down. It broke her heart and she knelt down and held him still, hugging her love into him, and talking softly in his ear. She covered him in kisses and asked if he would a quiet boy in the truck. When he could sit quietly for ten seconds she let him jump in. It looked like he was going to maul Jaime but suddenly he stepped backward toward the steering wheel and looked for Claire. Somehow the wonderful Pup recognized a man down and he kept his distance. “Move over a bit Pup. He’s alright, just a headache. It’s okay, you need to move over a bit.” Claire climbed into the driver’s seat with effort and was smashed against the door for the short ride home. Pup leaped out and ran around the entire house three times while she eased Jaime to the door.

“You get into bed and I’ll bring you some aspirin and water.” Pup was sitting behind her wagging his tail furiously with a look like he might die if she didn’t stop and play with him. He followed her upstairs and waited somewhat patiently for her to put a cold cloth on Jaime’s head and tuck him in.

“I love you, sweet man. Sleep this hangover away and let me worry about what’s to be worried about. I’ve got this.” She kissed his cheek and tried to rise but he held her to him, “thank ye Sassenach.”

When she laid on the floor downstairs, Pup found his angle and laid on his side looking into her eyes. He always did this and for the first time, Claire noticed this would have been the angle and position he had as a sick puppy when she would talk to him. It almost made her cry but she took a deep breath and started her Pup story about living in Scotland and all the adventures he would have following Jaime and Donus into the woods. Pup was in heaven looking at the one he loved most in the world. So happy she came back for him. She stroked him for so long he went to sleep and so did she.

An hour later Claire’s eyes slammed open with a gasp. She promised Jaime she would check in with Shawn and then went straight to sleep. Feeling deep guilt she shot down the road to the barn. She ran into the supply room and came out with three apples. A quick group hug with her favorite couple and on to Jag. Her heart was racing when she opened his stall door. He whinnied and drop his head in her arms so she could scratch his face. “My darling Jag, I’ve missed you so much.” She gave him the apple and hugged his neck. Be back for bath time, gotta go.

She looked everywhere and the barn was empty so she headed outside and walked around. There was construction everywhere and she finally saw Shawn digging more of the trough for the arena expansion. When he saw Claire he smiled brightly and came to meet her. He shook her hand and started downloading all the events while they were gone. It had been a quiet ten days as she expected.

Shawn took a breath like he wanted to speak and then closed his mouth.
“I think there’s more Shawn. If something is bothering you please tell me.”

He looked out into the pasture and shrugged his shoulders. “I dinna ken the rules here well enough but that John guy gets me fashed. I ken there’s nothin in Jaime’s office but an empty desk but John was always in there hanging out. He said he was resting between horses. It was weird that he was here all the time.”

“I appreciate you telling me Shawn. Jaime may want to do something about it and maybe not.” She needed to change the subject and lower her heart rate. “You have been busy! I counted eight jumps done and it’s been only ten days. How did you do that?”

Shawn blushed deeply at the compliment and looked at the ground. “Ruby helped me with most of them. She came back right after Christmas. Sarah did a lot of the painting because she was bored I guess.”

Bored my ass Claire thought. “You are a miracle to this expansion Shawn. Thank you for everything. Is there anything else?”

“Oh yea, the contractor will be here in the morning for the inspection. He said he’ll have cement trucks waiting to pour the foundation. Ah! Almost forgot. He is asking that Pup be kept in the house until the concrete is dry. Sorry.”

Claire laughed at that. “It’s a very good idea! I’ll see you tomorrow Shawn and thanks again.”

Before he left Shawn asked her to give something to Jaime for the arena. He was blushing red when he asked, then he ran toward the pasture.

Claire headed up the road to check on her friends and felt Pup crash into her calves from behind almost launching her onto the dirt road. “Pup, you crazy boy, you must stop that before you hurt us.”

Sarah answered the door, so delighted to see Claire. Ruby came out of her room and there were hugs all around. They looked at her ring and the pictures of the wedding still stored in her phone. Sarah kept swiping and whistled at the Hogmanay pictures. “This looks like a very special family Claire.”

While they talked about every single thing Ruby was quiet and troubled. Claire couldn’t help but notice she was not smiling much. She expected to hear something about relationship trouble with Shawn and braced herself for it. “Ruby, you look sad. What’s wrong?”

Ruby blushed deeply and shook her head. “Nothing,” is all she said.

Sarah straightened her spine and exhaled loudly. “Ruby you told me things in confidence so I am obligated to remain quiet. But if you don’t talk to Claire I will throw my degree in the trash and tell all.”

Claire was shocked and moved closer to Ruby. “Whatever it is, we will fix it Ruby, I promise. Have faith in me and tell me what happened.” Claire was horrified to see Ruby struggle against the tears that were coming and took her hands. Ruby lost her battle and sobbed before sucking in her breath and holding it in.

“Jesus Christ Ruby, please release Sarah from her obligation so she can tell me.” Ruby looked at Sarah and nodded. Claire braced herself and felt her insides starting to churn. She looked at Sarah.

“You have a fancy rider named John something. Do you know him? He’s been pushing his weight around since you left. He told Ruby she didn’t have the natural talent needed to go past first level, whatever that is. He strongly suggested she make way for a rider who could help Jaime rather than
hold him back. To Ruby, it was a fatal blow.”

Claire took deep breaths to calm herself. Her hands were shaking and her teeth were clenched so hard her jaw hurt. “That piece of shit!” She paced across the living room trying to calm down. It was long past time to bring Jaime into this. Now John was infecting the staff wanting to cripple Jaime and make him even more dependent on him.

Claire spoke quietly to remain in control of her anger. “John has an agenda Ruby. He is trying to make Jaime completely dependent on him. Take it as a compliment. He wouldn’t have gone after you if you weren’t good. You are good, better than good. You need to purge that nonsense from your mind and never think of it.” She grabbed Ruby’s face and looked into her eyes. Ruby nodded her agreement.

It’s time for us to check on a very hung-over Jaime. Ladies, enjoy your evening. Pup!

Claire walked slowly home practicing how she would tell Jaime what was happening. She was so angry and suddenly so lonely for Jaime’s calm port in the storm. There was something else going on in her stomach. Fear. She stopped and tried to reason out the foreboding she felt. She heard John’s voice in her head. “The reason I upset you so much is because you believe I could take him away from you. Something in you senses a competitor in the midst, therefore, there is an inkling of belief that Jaime might want me.”

This was clearly a lack of faith, a lack of trust in Jaime. She was breaking her vows already. By not telling Jaime about the talk with John in the tack room she was taking control instead of acting with trust. “You foolish girl” she mumbled.

Claire opened the door quietly in case Jaime was still sleeping. She heard the TV on in the study, Jaime was watching game highlights and yelling profanity at the rep. Claire exhaled a long breath and leaned her back against the door. Pup trotted into the study and came out with his second favorite person.

“Christ, Claire, ye look like ye lost yer last friend. What happened?” He walked to her in long strides and pulled her chin up to look at him.

Everything is fine with almost everything. Shawn has done an amazing job, concrete pours tomorrow after inspection, all the horses are healthy, and eight jumps are done already. She wasn’t smiling.

Jaime held onto her and walked her to the sofa. They sat knee to knee. Tell me what is not fine Sassenach.”

“I wanted to handle my jealousy over John Gray myself. It seemed petty and beneath us and I blamed myself for overreacting. Before our trip, he was being extra evil jumping for you and smiling at me after every compliment from you. So I confronted him. Claire remembered every word he said to her and recited it back to Jaime. Claire looked down at her hands for most of it, afraid to see something unbelievable in his eyes. Jaime reached out and covered her hands with his. She could feel him shaking and hear his breath deepen.

“I’m so sorry mo chridhe. What else has he done, tell me everything.”

When she finished Jaime hugged her and just held her for a minute. “Why couldn’t ye tell me Sassenach?”

“Because you need to sell horses and John needs to ride for you,” she said through her tears. “I just
wanted to ignore it and ride it out but he just got too awful.”

“Hush love, no more tears for that maggot. I will deal with John Gray but it must wait until tomorrow when Angus and Rupert are back. The two of them together can stop me. I want to unleash hell’s fire on him tonight but I might kill him for what he’s done to ye. Dinna fash sweet Sassenach. Ye will never see his face again.”

Claire took a deep breath and sighed with relief that it was over. She couldn’t know they would meet again and battle it out on the field and in the arena. She couldn’t know that one of the three would make a fatal mistake.
Rupert was tense and looked from Jaime to Angus. He anticipated having his friend in a head-lock before this was over and it filled him with dread.

“No holds barred, Jaime?”

“No holds barred.”

John Gray closed his car door and smiled at the Fraser Equestrian Center. It was a beautiful day made better because Jaime was home and they could resume their work. He would resume his dismantling of the meddling Claire but all that could wait. He didn’t want negative thoughts today and a deep breath cleared his head and his excitement returned.

He walked into the barn with a huge smile when he heard the laughter of Jaime and Angus. There’s Rupert’s laugh, he thought. They were all together. Thank God, because it had been a long ten days.

“Good morning gentleman,” he said smiling. Jaime jumped down from the corral bars he was sitting on and threw an arm around John’s shoulders. He was still laughing at whatever the joke was. John looked at the face he loved and felt the arm tighten around his neck. He was confused and moved to slip out of Jaime’s grasp but the arm tightened more. “Jaime, what the hell! Are you trying to choke me?” Johns mind was making a desperate attempt to figure out what was happening and he was starting to panic. His eyes bugged out and searched frantically for Rupert and Angus who were not laughing anymore. They stood watching him suffer. When he tried to speak Jaime flexed and closed his windpipe, when he was silent he could breathe just enough to stay alive.

“John. I’ll be writin a child support check and living up on the hill with ye. That’s what ye told Claire. Ye put fear and doubt in her mind and tortured the lass did ye not?” John tried to speak and Jaime tightened his arm around his neck until Angus warned him off. John was limp until Jaime slapped him enough times, and he raised his head. His skin was white and his eyes wide like he knew death would come for him soon.

“you pathetic maggot, wake up and defend your worthless hide. C’mon!” Rupert looked at Angus and both men were afraid Jaime was over the edge. They both inched toward Jaime, waiting for him to get control of his anger and not very excited about jumping between them.

“Wake up John I have somethin to tell ye.” He slapped John until he opened his eyes. “Between now and the next time I see ye, you’re a dead man walkin. If ye dare to speak to anyone I know or get near my wife or my barn, I’ll make it last all night until ye beg me to finish ye.” Jaime let go of John abruptly and crashed into his face with a savage uppercut knocking the man out cold. He went to grab him for more punishment and Rupert and Angus fought him off pushing him back to the corral bars. Angus held him there and Rupert dragged John’s body out of the barn. Rupert wrangled John into his car and started the engine before running smelling salts under his nose. “Get out before he kills ye laddie.” John was losing consciousness again and Rupert gave another sniff of the salts putting the tiny bottle in John’s hand before kicking the door closed.

Jaime pushed Angus off of him and sprinted out of the barn. He had to get home and see Claire. By the time he closed the front door, he had control of his breathing but not much else. Claire was cooking eggs and bacon and looked up at him.

“You still don’t feel good do you, poor gorgeous man.” She was next to him pushing the hair off his face and smiling up at him. He grabbed her into his arms and was turning the stove burners off in
three strides. He carried her upstairs and turned the shower on before pulling her clothes off with a need that almost buckled his knees. He lifted Claire into the shower and held her like his life depended on it. Something primordial in Claire’s brain told her to keep silent and hold onto him.

Jaime seized her mouth and pushed her against the wall of the shower, grinding into her stomach. I need ye lass but I don’t want to hurt ye. Please tell me to stop if I do.” He pulled her up and pushed her legs around his waist feeling her pull him into her warm, wet, safety. He just held her like that for several minutes breathing deeply. Claire hung on silently. She worried something was terribly wrong and made an attempt to climb off of him. He growled and gripped her tighter, pushing into her with force and gulping air.

Claire dropped her mouth to his ear and told him how much she loved and desired him. She told him he was her everything and asked him to make love to her while she kissed his jaw and neck. Jaime turned the water off and carried her locked onto him to the bed. He laid on his back and looked up at the only thing that truly mattered to him.

Claire straddled him and rocked her rhythm until he was under her spell. Jaime flipped her under him, “let me in lass.” Her arms came around him and she held him tightly as he drove into her. He dropped his head to her shoulder and he pounded into her. Claire’s receptive body let him exorcize the demons that were let loose with his anger. His whole body shook with his orgasm and he clutched her to him.

When he could breathe again he dropped to his side and looked into her amber eyes. He touched her cheek, “no one will come between us love. When yer scared, threatened or happy just look to your side and I’ll be right there, always.

Claire finally understood he had dealt with John this morning. “Did you hit Rupert or Angus?”

Jaime laughed, “no, those lads are brave, I’ll give them that.” When he laughed again it was deep and refreshing. The anger that gripped him was gone. The beast was back in his cage and his Sassenach was safe and warm pressed against his body.

John sped down the road half conscious and hit a concrete barrier. It would be three days in a coma and when he woke he remembered every moment of his encounter with Jaime.

Claire sat at the dining room table with Ruby and spread her pictures out all around them. She had printed all the pictures of Lallybroch, the woods that surrounded the house, and the fields in the distance. She printed a close up of Jaime, herself, Ian, Jenny and wee Jaime.

“When Jaime and I are older and the Center is making enough money, we hope to live in Scotland half the year on his family’s estate. His birthday is coming up and I would love to have a picture made to remind him of home and his sister. If by the miracle of your talent, it could be a snapshot of our future with our children and grandchildren around us it would be the best gift for him.”

She pulled out a picture and pointed to the house and land. "I would love to build a house under the trees, like right here and make it big enough to sleep all my children who will vacation there with us. Maybe five bedrooms so it needs to be big. There will be flower beds and herb gardens all around it. Jenny’s children will be grown, as will ours, young adults with their own families so there needs to be lots of children from babies to about seven or eight years old. Jenny and I have some gray in our hair and we are planting, or canning or running after small children. Jaime is riding Donus with a child in front of him. It will be summer when we’re there so everything will be green and growing.”

She looked at Ruby and blushed due to what she was about to say. “This is Jaime’s birthday present and it will honor the special relationship he has with his sister.” Claire put her hand to her heart and
closed her eyes. "Is it possible to show that emotion in a picture or painting?"

“Yes. That is always the goal, my goal.” Ruby grabbed her sketch pad and pencils then laid out the pictures of each adult in front of her.

“What is Ian’s emotion?”

“Happy and laughing at or with someone, always.”

“What is Jaime’s emotion?”

“So happy to be home in his beloved Scotland”

“What is yours?”

“Grateful, loving these people, wanting to hold them all to my bosom.”

Ruby looked at her questioningly.

“It’s an expression, Ruby.”

“What is Jenny’s emotion?”

“The purest love for her children and hero worship of Jaime.”

Ruby was sketching madly and writing notes.

“Lallybroch has to be clearly seen and we are all outside enjoying the day. If possible, it would show our house in the woods that border the property.”

Claire looked at Ruby. “It’s a tall order, I know. Your work is so amazing if anyone can do this, it’s you.” Claire cleared her throat, “will you do it for five hundred?”

“Five hundred what?” She asked distractedly. “Dollars!” Ruby jumped up, “Five hundred dollars?”

Claire looked up at her knowing she hadn’t had two dimes to rub together since she came to the Center. “yes Ruby.”

“Yes, I can do it.” She sat down with a huge smile. “Wait, when is Jaime’s birthday?”

“Two months.”

Ruby scoffed, “easy.”

Claire was quite pleased when she walked home. It was the perfect gift that would stand as a reminder of what they were working for and help ease Jaime’s loneliness for Jenny and Ian. Now that it was clear in her mind she hoped Ruby could do this because nothing else would be as good.

Ruby spent every spare moment on the painting. She searched for pictures of the Scottish Highlands in summer, home construction in the area, she snapped pictures of Lallybroch from Google earth, and sketched a summer day in front of the house. She rendered each face and emotion separately using the photos for accuracy and then she aged them slowly until she had three detailed drawings of each adult at the age Claire wanted.

Ruby put all her renderings on a large board propped up on a chair. It was like these people moved in with her and lived in her room now. Ruby was quite taken with Jenny. Claire snapped a photo
when she was happy and excited but staring at her brother with a heart full of love. She laid in bed at night and stared at their faces on her board, heard their laughter and the picture started to come alive for her.

One night, when she looked at Jenny’s face she said, “Tying a string on a balloon with a child in front of you reaching for it... It’s a birthday party!” Ruby shot off the bed and went to her rough sketch of the whole painting. With the lightest touch, she sketched in a large family table with dishes and party hats, napkins, forks, and cups. She sketched in a bottle of an unknown substance and a large bowl of punch. She stepped back and saw the characters enjoying a summer day and a birthday party outside. Ian was flying a kite with his adult son and grandson. Jenny tying the balloon and looking at Jaime riding Donus out of the woods with a grandchild in front of him. Claire would be standing at the table filling a can with cut tulips and handing one to the child on her son’s shoulders as they stood with her. She anticipated there would be some shifting but she had the basics of Claire’s picture figured out.

Over the next week, she rendered Donus so brilliantly it looked like a photograph. His ears were forward, eyes bright, focused on the festivities. She added Donus to the board and looked at Jaime’s face. It was too pensive and heavy. She had to start over and she looked for a bright-faced Jaime that didn’t look drunk. She would use the happy drunk to morph his face into happy contemplation. She put her pencil to the paper and three hours later sat in a sea of crumpled paper on the floor. Ruby took a deep breath and let go of her frustration. This had never happened to her before, especially with the aid of real photographs. She needed to walk away from this for now.

As the weeks passed, a rider was hired from the Scottsdale barn and the team was able to keep up the busy show schedule. Jaime was selling horses almost as soon as they were ready. He was turning so much horseflesh that buyers started calling him directly wanting to see the greenies before they showed. Ruby was launched into the demonstration rider position and Jaime would explain to the buyer that Ruby was still a bit green herself. When Ruby was having a good ride Jaime would mention that a good horse can make any rider look good. It was working for the most part and Ruby was getting better. Much better.

Some of the buyers wanted to see the horse on the field and Jaime would invite them to watch his rider on the field during the next show. Ruby pestered Jaime to let her ride the cross country jumps in their pasture and Jaime staunchly refused. “When Claire says yer ready” is all he would say. The next time she asked he stopped abruptly and turned on her.

“Have ye ever galloped a horse, Ruby? Where both front legs hit the dirt at the same time and each stride is a leap to cover ground. Ye hold all yer weight off his back so he can move like he does in the wild runnin from a predator. One mistake at that speed could throw off yer balance and launch ye into what ever’s in your path. The morning of the cross country every horse must be vetted for soundness and every rider wears a medical bracelet. Do ye ken why that is?”

Ruby looked at her feet. “I can get a checkup if you want.”

Jaime gave up, “when Claire says yer ready Ruby.”

Riding for buyers required new clothes for Ruby and the women planned a day of shopping and lunch. Sarah and Claire brought armfuls of clothes to the dressing room and Ruby made short work of choosing her favorites. When they were done, she had three new breeches, three shirts, and a show jacket. Claire searched her mind for what else Ruby would need when she suddenly told them to stop. Claire pulled Ruby to the boot section and asked for someone to measure her for Parlanti high boots.

Sarah laughed at Ruby’s expression. “Here, sit down and put your head between your knees before
you faint.”

Claire realized this was extravagant but Ruby had worked her butt off for nothing more than free room and board. She had this coming and Claire would spend about a thousand dollars today for Ruby to be properly turned out.

Ruby’s eyes stung with tears during the measurements and when they were done she hugged Claire and thanked her over and over again.

They left the store in great spirits heading for the Mountain Cafe. Halfway out the door Claire stopped and held her stomach with her eyes wide and fearful. “Christ, what is that. Oh shit, something is wrong.”

Sarah shot back and helped her to the car. Claire called her doctor’s office and spoke to the nurse who told her to go home and get into bed, just to be safe. She was to call them if she felt any pain or showed any blood. Claire let Jaime know it was probably nothing but she was heading home for some rest.

Jaime was frozen with worry. He never considered something might happen during the pregnancy to threaten the bairn or Claire. It never crossed his mind. Now it seized his mind and he paced the driveway waiting to see Sarah’s car. He was a mess inside and tried to act normal when all he wanted to do is pick his wife up and drive her straight to the emergency room.

Later, Claire looked at her freaked out husband and pleaded with him not to worry so much. “I didn’t feel pain, Jaime. It felt like there was fluttering in my abdom…” She gave Jaime a startled look. “It was the baby moving! That is what it was, I felt the baby turning or kicking or something. Oh, my God, that’s why the nurse seemed nonchalant about it.” She was suddenly overcome. Her face looked like she had seen an angel and the tears were flowing.

Claire put her hand on Jaime’s cheek, “I’m sorry I scared you, love.” She pulled him to her and kissed him.

“Can I see?” He asked.

Claire laughed and displayed her abdomen. Jaime could get his whole hand around her grapefruit sized bump and his eyes were soft and his face serene. “Dinna be makin your mam fash lassie, or me. Just sleep and grow and stay well.” He kissed the grapefruit and then kissed his wife.

Ruby jumped down of her horse and handed Rupert the reins. He mentioned Claire was having a problem and Jaime left without giving him the schedule for the afternoon. He looked up and saw Ruby running out of the arena.

Jaime would not have left if Claire was fine, she thought. She had to get up to the house and see what was wrong. She cut across the lawns and saw Jaime walking down the street back to the barn. He hadn’t seen Ruby taking the short cut and she had a moment to study his face. He looked like a different person. A slight smile, bright face, and happy.

Ruby knew Claire was fine looking at Jaime’s face so she turned right and ran up the road to her studio-bedroom to lock his expression onto paper. Two hours flew by and she blew on the image to rid the specks of graphite. She put the image on the board next to her original of Jaime and knew she got the image she wanted. She would age his face like the others and this part of her task was done. She was pulled out of her concentration by her buzzing cell phone.

“Sorry Jaime I’m coming right now!” Ruby ran for the door panic-stricken at being late to ride for a
buyer but extremely happy with her work. It was time to put paint to canvas, her favorite part. She would start tonight and take her time.
Chapter 42

Claire dropped into a chair in the kitchen with a sigh. The back of Sarah’s house was opened to the outside because they had been doing yard work this morning. Claire looked at her dirty hands and laughed.

“You left this paper here yesterday,” Sarah told her, handing the folded paper towards Claire.

“Oh crap, I got so upset with the John incident I didn’t remember to take it.” She unfolded the paper and spread it out on the table. It was a schematic of the arena and she looked closely at the measurements and notes written in a careful hand. She wasn’t sure what it was Shawn wanted to show Jaime and continued to look. “Good God! This is absolutely brilliant!” She folded the paper and headed for the door. “Shawn found a way to double the use of the arena. I have to find Jaime.”

Sarah looked at the closed front door and walked back outside to finish up.

Claire was excited when she saw Jaime in the office alone. He looked up at her face and leaned back in his chair, waiting. “What do ye have there Sassenach?” He laughed at her inability to restrain her excitement.

Claire unfolded the paper and spread it out on Jaime’s desk. “This is Shawn’s idea, I left it at Sarah’s yesterday by accident. Look at the arena.”

Jaime scanned the drawings and notes and stood abruptly. “Where is he.” Claire grabbed his hand and walked outside with him. She could not understand why he would be angry. Was he angry?

Jaime approached Shawn and shook the paper at him. “What made you think…of the best idea I’ve seen yet for this expansion!”

Claire and Shawn both released the breath they were holding. Oh, you wicked man, Claire thought.

Jaime pumped Shawn’s hand with a massive smile. “Yer uncle failed to mention ye were so smart lad. I’m grateful to ye and we’ll be the first barn to incorporate this technology. C’mon, we need to sit a bit and maybe pull the contractor into it if he’s still here.” He looked at Claire and kissed her forehead.

“I’m heading to a shower and the office. I’ll see you guys tonight,” she peeled away towards home.

The amazing addition that Shawn designed was a removable partition that separated the huge arena into two. A retractable fence stored in a housing on the outside of the arena fence with an opening to the interior. The fencing was made out of a plastic blend to make it lightweight and short sections were folded into the housing like an accordion. It was an idea in its infancy but Jaime was excited and brought Angus and Rupert into the office to share ideas. The contractor stopped by the office and laughed all the way back to his truck. Jaime wanted this and he would find a way to bring it to life.

As they disbanded, Jaime pulled Shawn aside. “Do ye know anythin about patents laddie? Learn what ye can so ye might protect the idea and make some extra money. Talk to Dougal. Tell him I think this will be big. Ask him what to do.”

Shawn was nodding, just happy to have his idea taken seriously by Jaime. When he was halfway out of the office he stopped and looked at Jaime. “Me?”
Jaime leaned back in his chair and regarded Shawn.

“I am to patent the barrier, not ye?” He asked.

“It’s not my idea, ye ken? Take some time and go see Dougal lad.” Seeing the schematic still on his desk he grabbed it and ran to intercept Shawn already heading down the driveway.

Over the next two months, the barn was built, Shawn and Rupert finished the cross country jumps and two water features were dug out, Angus continued to school the abundance of greenies and oversee Ruby’s progress as well as their new rider. Claire worked two days per week at Joe’s clinic and worked with Ruby and Angus three days a week. It was an exciting time for all.

Jaime rubbed his eyes and pushed away from his ledgers. This task used to bring him joy when the numbers were black and the tally promised another quarter year of expenses paid. Now every entry was red and the columns had doubled with loan payments, construction costs, salaries, and the never-ending addition of greenie expenses. He leaned back and exhaled a huge breath feeling the enormity of the obligation he had taken on. He felt the anxiety start in his stomach and had to stretch his legs and get away from the hateful ledger book.

It was March 18th, one more day until he was thirty-one years old and he worried he had taken on too much. He walked through the quiet barn. It was late, going on nine in the evening and he was alone. Claire was in a late meeting, Rupert and Angus had left for home hours ago. He walked into the new barn and smelled fresh wood, peat, and shavings. It was almost done and waiting for borders that he prayed would come. He inspected the large stalls for his breeding mares, once he found them. And the anxiety grew. Stall after empty stall looked perfect, and he hoped. The arena was still coming together and would see truckloads of sand, peat, sawdust, and sterilized dirt brought in over the next week to create a safe, soft cushion for the working horses. He hoped.

He felt lonely all of a sudden. Alone with the enormity of his financial obligation. He whistled for Pup and started to lock up.

Claire sat on Sarah’s couch feeling tremendous excitement at seeing Ruby’s picture. Sarah had watched the painting come to life but never said much to Claire about it. That made her nervous but she had faith in Ruby’s talent.

Ruby walked out of her bedroom with a canvas under a blanket. She was quite nervous about revealing what would become her greatest artistic achievement. Sarah looked on from the kitchen and held her breath.

“I hope you like it,” Ruby said quietly. She lifted the blanket and turned the painting around to show Claire.

Claire gasped and reached for the large canvas leaning it against a chair to look at every square inch. She couldn’t speak, the words she wanted would not come, so she continued to admire the faces and colors, and emotion that Ruby brought to life. The colors were so vibrant with every shade of green imaginable. When she saw her future house under the shade of the tall trees she held her hand to her mouth and fought the tears coming down her cheeks.

“Ruby…” She couldn’t speak yet so she didn’t try. She looked at the perfect detail of the faces, Donus and Jaime coming out of the woods, Jenny’s incredible love for her brother. She looked at herself in the painting. Aged and happy offering a flower to a child on the shoulders of what would be her child. It was so much more than she ever thought possible. Her eyes wandered all over the painting and she saw Lallybroch so perfectly painted it started her tears again.
Ruby looked at Sarah after ten minutes with her eyebrows up. Sarah knew Claire was overwhelmed at the moment and she felt such pride in Ruby.

Claire stood up awkwardly negotiating the basketball in her stomach. She walked around and took Ruby’s hands looking like she might faint. “Ruby…” She went back to the painting making Sarah laugh. When she could speak, she mentioned every detail and the conveyance of emotion on all the faces. When she got to herself in the painting, she finally noticed there was a brown dog next to her with its front feet up on the bench trying to see what was on the table. It was clearly Pup and Claire blinked hard so she could see through her tears.

“Ruby, Pup won’t….”

“I can paint him out in about ten minutes Claire, it’s easy. But, I think Pup will always be with you, in fact, I’m sure he will. So I couldn’t leave him out.” The last sentence was said just above a whisper.

Claire stood again and hugged Ruby for a whole minute, sniffling and thanking her over and over again.

When Ruby could move again, she ran to her room and came back with two large manila envelopes that were stuffed with her renderings. Each separated by a sheet of wax paper for protection. Claire sat down and looked through the stack marveling at the creative process.

Claire felt completely undone at the moment but over the moon at what Ruby had created. “Can I come by tomorrow afternoon and pick it up?”

“Are you going to get all that strange food you stuffed in the refrigerator too?” Sarah asked.

Claire twisted the key and sat quietly in her truck. She pressed her hands around her basketball and sighed. “This will make your da so happy sweetheart.”

She saw Pup’s head popping up to see her through the window and giggled. Behind Pup, Jaime stood watching her and smiling. She whispered, “thank you God for all of this.”

Jaime opened her door and placed a stool on the driveway so she could step down easier. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

Pup had figured out a month before that his beloved human was in a delicate condition. At first, he pressed his nose into her growing belly and sniffed deeply making her laugh. Jaime held her hands letting Pup investigate as much as he needed to. When the baby kicked he leaped backward and then came right back and pressed his nose again. Pup looked in Claire’s eyes and she gasped at the knowledge she saw in him. “He knows Jaime!” she had said. From then on, he would sit down when she got home, tail wagging like mad, and wait for her to call him over, which she always did in short order.

Pup trotted after his humans into the house. He missed knocking her over and biting at her hair and neck. It was great fun and it always made her laugh. Something deep inside him told him to be gentle now. Something was inside her and it needed his protection. That became Pup’s prime directive after hearing it move inside her. On nights when the baby was active enough to wake her, she would see Pup resting his head on the mattress with his nose next to her stomach. She would stroke his face and ears telling him everything was fine and he was such a good boy. It was special time she shared with Pup and she marveled at his ability to hear the movement of her baby, even from his bed on the floor.

Claire woke with the dawn and stumbled to the window to watch Jaime and Donus. She didn’t
always wake in time and enjoyed watching this morning. She watched Jaime lead Donus out of the arena and into the pasture. She could see Donus flex his muscles when Jaime cantered toward the field jumps. Claire ran for the field glasses and strained her neck to see them. She finally opened the window and stuck her head out. She felt herself flex forward in time with Jaime’s jumps and laughed at herself for this unconscious effort. “I need to get back in a saddle,” she laughed.

All that afternoon she chopped vegetables and fried bannocks in preparation of Jaime’s birthday dinner. She stopped by the barn earlier and gave him his present. A photo album of the expansion as it progressed. He was delighted with it and covered her face in kisses. She promised a meal fit for a Scot and left, smiling to herself. When she collected the food and the painting she sat on her couch looking at all the detail and the people she missed. She decided to have a quality picture done that could be enlarged to send to Jenny and Ian. She wrapped the canvas and leaned it against Jaime’s chair.

Rupert and Angus were waiting in Jaime’s office when it was time to knock off for the evening. They presented Jaime with a fine bottle of whiskey that was promptly opened and enjoyed by three close mates. After three shots and vulgar toasts, Jaime capped the bottle and made his way home. Halfway up the road he could smell the food of home and quickened his step. The house was heavy with aroma and his stomach churned in anticipation. He kissed Claire’s neck and smelled the Colcannon bubbling on the stove.

“Sassenach, I see a present on my chair.” His hand caressed her bulging stomach making her breathe a little deeper. “Ah, you gave in and bought me the Marilyn Monroe picture that I love, did ye naught. A fine wife ye are since ye said it was… gauche, I think ye said. She had the boobs of a goddess and now I can stare at them all day long,” he said teasingly and bit her on the neck.

“Something like that.” Claire was bringing dishes to the table. “Do you want to open it before we eat?”

Jaime sat down with the picture on his lap. The canvas was large, and he pulled the paper away slowly. He stared at the picture, now inches from his face. His Adam's apple bobbed with his attempts to swallow and his eyes filled with tears. His hand touched each face and bairn reverently.

“Lights” he croaked. “Please Sassenach, turn on all the lights. Please.”

Claire brought the lights up to flood the room and watched Jaime study the picture. When he touched Jenny’s face her heart lodged in her throat and almost choked her. He wiped at his face and tried to clear his throat. He was clearly struggling to find words.

Claire pulled a picture off the wall that faced Jaime’s chair. “Let’s put it on the wall so you can see it better,” she said. Jaime’s eyes followed the picture as she carried it to the wall and hung it up.

Jaime stood behind her and pulled her to him. “Where in God’s name did you have this done?” How could someone paint this so perfectly? We’re older! It’s Lallybroch and we are older, and the other adults are our children! Sassenach, it’s our future at Lallybroch! It is magnificent love. What an exceptional gift.”

Claire was thrilled with his reaction. It was just what she hoped it would be. “Ruby painted this picture from the photographs I took during our trip. It’s to remind us of what we’re working towards and to help you when you miss Jenny and Ian.” She spoke softly, so taken back by the look on Jaime’s face. “The theme and the grandchildren came out of Ruby’s creative genius.”

Jaime continued to stare at the painting with a huge smile. “There’s our house! Like ye said, under the big trees. That bairn I’m holdin in front of me, that’s a grandchild, isn’t it Sassenach! Ah, look at yer face, so beautiful and full of love. I know that’s exactly how ye will look when yer older. So
beautiful ye are.”

Claire was wiping tears from her cheeks and Pup was almost stepping on her feet sensing something was amiss. Claire laughed and hugged him, “its okay Pup, tears of joy. Come and eat while you look.”

Jaime backed up and fell into his seat, not taking his eyes from the painting. “How did she do that? Jenny’s expression is exactly how she looks at me when I see her at the airport, comin home.” He chewed the food with audible pleasure and kept Claire’s hand in his, still not taking his eyes off the painting. Jaime turned his gaze to Claire, “Ruby thinks we’ll be having a son after the lass.” He looked at his hand covering Claire’s as she tried to negotiate eating with her left hand. “Sorry mo chridhe, ye can have yer hand back.”

Jaime continued to make comments about what he could see in the painting and when they were full he asked Claire to walk up to Sarah’s house. He had to tell Ruby how much he loved the painting.

Claire put the food away and they walked up the hill with Pup. When Jaime saw Ruby at the door he couldn’t help himself and he hugged her tightly. Ruby was so happy and stepped back to let them in. Jaime held Ruby’s hands and with his eyes sparkling he said thank ye in a way that touched Ruby’s soul. All the hours she invested in creating his painting was worth it times ten. She felt so happy and closed the door with the resolve to paint more. She wanted to make other people happy this way.

Ruby laid in her bed that night and looked at the empty board propped up on her chair. She felt a little lost without the faces she had studied for the past two months. She heard the words of her father, “Ruby your art is a gift from God. It’s meant to be shared with people.” Until now she had taken it for granted, her love for riding pushing her talent to the shelf. If she could make other people as happy as Jaime she did not want to wait. She would paint for others when they wanted her to. She would start taking pictures of the people and horses she saw every day and hone her skills with smaller paintings. She smiled in the dark and tried to feel tired but finally gave up and reached for her sketch pad.

She lightly sketched the head of a woman without adding much more than the hair around her face. More detail was added to the body and the round stomach that was held dear by the hands of the woman. Ruby chose a light source that would illuminate the pensive woman’s face as she sat in repose with her legs tucked beneath her. As Ruby filled in the detail of the woman’s face and body she felt excitement and continued until deep in the night. It would be a smaller canvas for Claire, to thank her for everything she’d done to help Ruby, not the least of which was showing her how important her art was.

Claire laid in Jaime’s arms after making love. She practically had to rape him these days because he was so spooked about hurting the baby. She smiled and pressed her face to his neck.

Jaime ran his fingers through her hair and took a deep breath. “I was so full of fear last night after working with the ledgers. It was late and I walked through the new barn with a churnin stomach, completely fashed. I kent I had made a mistake with so much obligation.”

Claire pressed into him, “Jaime, please don’t worry, we will make it work, I know we will.”

“Mo Chridhe, I am not a man who lives in fear, never have been. This will sound crazy…” he paused, “that painting made me see the man I am and how many lives will benefit from our success here. What stands between us and the reality in the painting is this barn.” Jaime snuggled her neck and caressed her stomach. “I need to return to what works, ye ken. Make sure everyone is doing what their best at and stop meddling in business assigned to the others.” He turned Claire so she would look at him. “My drive, yer skill” he tickled her making her squeal with laughter, “and the
“Great team we have will make this work. I know it will love.”

“As do I” Claire agreed pressing against him. There was a mighty kick from the bairn that startled Jaime. “Your daughter agrees with me I guess,” she said giggling.

Pup laid in his bed with his eyes open to the dark. He would stay that way until his humans were breathing deep in sleep. Just like he did every night.
Chapter 43

The wind blew softly down the main aisle of the barn bringing the aromas of spring. Still cool and comfortable, but it would be the last kiss of the kind weather in the desert. The horses could smell a change in the breeze and enjoyed the cool fingers of air caressing them from head to tail.

She came in like the breeze. Floating down the aisle, smiling at the horses. If she lingered they would try to touch her with their lips and head. If she cupped their chin to kiss them they would stand perfectly still and wait for it. She had a way about her that brought them to her.

Donus knew her scent and still could not help himself from straining his corral bars to see her. She touched him and he recognized the eyes that slanted slightly upwards. She moved on, admiring the athletic bodies and feeling them yearn to run. She stood at Jag’s stall and was very still and smiling. Jag watched her from the half door and was disappointed in what he saw. He turned his head back out the half door, looking for long black hair.

“Can I help you?” Jag gave a whinny and walked toward the second voice. He leaned over the bars to sniff black hair.

“Ah, he’s yers then. A fine beast he is too.”

“You’re Scottish. Are you here to see Jaime?”

“I am, though he doesn’t know I’m here.”

Claire looked the woman over. She was a bit older, but lovely, with beautiful strawberry blonde hair that looked natural. “I am Jaime’s wife, Claire.”

The woman had a full and genuine smile and her eyes sparkled. “I was so hopin ye were!”

Claire laughed to ease her discomfort. “And you are?”

“Gellis Dunkin Black,” she said holding out her hand.

Claire did her best to hide her shock and tried to keep smiling. She felt like a fat cow next to this woman who seemed to radiate sensuality. What do you want with Jaime she thought.

“Jaime is in the city today at a meeting. Come, let’s get acquainted.”

Claire had sweat rolling down her face from cleaning tack and needed to get to air conditioning before she fainted. She led Gellis into the office and offered her a seat.

“I know who you are, and how much you did for Jaime years ago. It makes me feel jealous because you shared a bond with him. Didn’t you.”

Gellis studied Claire for a moment, “I’m not used to such honesty and I must say it’s quite an ice breaker Claire. Thank you. The truth of it is I was his teacher for a blink of an eye. His skill surpassed mine in a few months and after that, I exploited him whenever I could. He made me money while he was my rider and I never cut him in on it. He was happy to be showing the circuit and sharing my bed. Sorry Claire.” Gellis shook her head like she had just done the one thing she was trying not to do.

No one could hold Jaime down. His star was rising and everybody wanted him. When he left to ride
for another barn I tried to break his heart with words and he stood there in his youth and took my
punishment. When I was finally spent, he thanked me for showing him a life he would love forever.”

Claire was on the edge of her seat and slightly overwhelmed with Gellis’s truth. She stayed silent,
waiting.

“I can’t tell you how many times I have remembered his face in the last twelve years. So humble,
grateful, and caring. The face I saw at the end deserved better than the likes of me.”

Claire was spellbound. “You couldn’t have been so bad Gellis. It was just money and it was your
business. I’m sure there are a lot of arrangements like that for riders.”

“But not here. Right Claire? Jaime treats his people and riders well, I ken this. I saw his fairness and
compassion. Yer perfect for him because I feel the same qualities in ye. I’ll bet ye run a daycare or
somethin.”

Claire laughed. “I’m a surgeon and Jaime’s rider. Taking a year off to procreate.” She pointed at her
stomach. “But before I’m either of those things, I’m Jaime’s wife and he is my everything.”

“I can see that lass,” Gellis said laughing. If there was room in my head for romantic ideas and my
heart wasn’t made of stone I might get teary-eyed at the two of ye.” She regarded Claire with her
slight smile and cat-like eyes. “I tried the love thing. When it was gettin hard to stay in the saddle
eight hours a day I decided it was time to find a husband and a new project that would take me into
old age. I put a lot of effort into a breeding program and called in all my markers for the best sperm I
could get. With two mares in foal, I started to bat my eyes at every good lookin man with a bankroll.
I married one, Ronald G Black.” Gellis smiled at the memory. “The man could spin me like a top. I
had a great time with him because he could fuck me into next Tuesday and he loved money as much
as I did. He didn’t know a lick about horses and I felt some weird comfort in that.”

Ron was very good at keeping me off guard. If I got quiet because I was thinkin too much he would
whisk me off to Jamaica or Cacoon for a lover’s weekend. I had doubts even in the first year but I
didn’t want the fun to end so I ignored them.

“Heavy hitters were investing big money in Ronald and I wanted in. So, I pulled all the equity out of
my barn and handed it over to him. He promised me a thirty percent return on my investment and
that would supplement my retirement very well. So I took a chance.”

Gellis looked at Claire. “Need I go on?”

Claire looked away, “no, I think I get it Gellis, and I’m so sorry.”

“While he was away I had a visitor. A nice lady, a bit older than me, said she was his wife and knew
of three others, also married to him, also penniless from his treachery. But they were meek and mild
compared to the investors that started callin. When I couldn’t give them a date for his return it didn’t
take them long to figure out he had stolen their money and the death threats started. Claire, I’m afraid
they are going to kill me.”

Claire regarded Gellis in a different light suddenly. So you’ve come to Jaime for what? A bailout, a
loan, protection? She was kicking herself for trusting Gellis and waited for the begging to start.

“What of your barn and broodmares?”

“The bank owns them now except for two worthless horses that I sold before they foreclosed.” She
laughed. “Those horses are why I’m here Claire. I want Jaime to have them.” She smiled like it was
an amazing gift. “Will ye walk with me to my truck Claire? I have somethin very important to show
ye.” Gellis stood up and walked toward the parking lot. “Yer gonna want to see this Claire,” she called.

Claire followed Gellis completely confused about giving worthless and sold horses to Jaime. So far it didn’t make much sense.

When the women were safely locked into Gellis’s truck she pulled out a file folder and handed it to Claire then she changed her mind and took the file back. “Here is my worthless little 2019 colt. Innie cute?”

Claire looked at a gorgeous baby. “He’s beautiful Gellis but I’m confused, is he one of the horses you sold recently? He doesn’t look worthless. Quite the contrary.”

“Ya well, worthless beauty gets born sometimes.” Then she handed Claire a copy of the same picture with his champion sire and mare lines. It was his registration picture and birth data. It was the same horse. The mare is from the Romanov sire line, the third best in the world right now in dressage.

Claire was incredulous and her mouth hung open as she wrestled to make sense of all this. “I’m still confused Gellis.”

“It took eight years of breeding to get my best two breeders and I’ll not have all that work taken by a cold-hearted bank.” Gellis fell apart at that moment and Claire could feel the enormity of her loss. “I knew it was comin, the foreclosure. I filed the change of ownership a good eight weeks before the notice was posted on my property.”

Claire looked at Gellis, “you said two horses.”

“This is a horse that someone boarded until recently. Pretty nice for a common western horse.” She handed Claire the picture.

Claire was confused about looking at a boarder’s horse but looked more closely at the picture. She felt her heart rate shoot up and her hands shake. “This is a Danish Warmblood Gellis, and she is stunning. How tall is she? Who is she?”

“She is the pride of my breeding program, sired by Idle Dice her mare line is Holland’s Heart. She is almost four years old and in foal. Her baby will sell for twenty-two, maybe twenty-five thousand.” She is my heart.” Gellis pulled the identical picture out and handed it to Claire. It was her registration, sire and mare lines, and birth data.

Gellis grabbed Claire’s arm her eyes wide with worry. “She has been pampered and loved since she dropped and now she’s alone in a huge pasture and I am worried sick. She is close to dropping. Claire, please help her.”

Claire just stared at the mare like she was in love. “This mare is a direct decedent of Idle Dice”, she whispered.

Suddenly Claire’s mind flipped into overdrive. What is my liability if I help? What do you intend to do with her? Who is feeding her? Ah, fuck it, let’s go get her. We can figure the rest out later.

Claire started toward her trailer, “wait a minute. What happens to them now Gellis?”

“I filed the transfer of ownership eight weeks ago like I said. Jaime owns them now.”

Claire stood rooted to the ground. She couldn’t decide what question to ask first. She pulled her phone out and dialed Jaime’s number. She could hear men talking in the background before he could
say hello.

“Jaime, am I smart and trustworthy?”

“Aye, don’t forget beautiful and verra sexy.”

“Please… break land speed records to get here now! No joke Jaime, hurry!”

“Done.”

She put her phone away and looked at a shaking Gellis. Her tough talk at first was just bravado. She was terrified for this horse.

“Will you come up to the house with me. Jaime will be here soon. I’ll give you some Scottish whiskey we brought back with us.” Claire put two fingers in her mouth and blew air and spittle. She tried again. “It worked last week dammit. I used to be so good at this.”

Gellis was losing patience and nearly broke her eardrums with a piercing whistle.

“Okay Gellis, showing off is just not ladylike, c’mon. Oh, there may be a dog crashing into your calves any minute. I find knee’s bent is best, just in case.” She pulled Gellis along to the house. Halfway up Claire looked around for Pup. “Would you mind one more whistle?” Gellis obliged and they soon saw Pup running full speed around the barn heading for the road. Gellis got behind Claire and as Pup approached Claire put her hands on her beach ball stomach and Pup skidded like a first baseman shooting dust at the women. He laid down in the street looking up at Claire.

Claire pulled shavings off his head and laughed. “Were you sleeping in Jag’s stall again. You’re the best boy.”

“I think dogs are the curse of humanity. It’s why they invented whiskey. Can we go now?”

Gellis walked around the lower floor while Claire answered her phone.

“Tell me yer alright mo chridhe before I lose my mind!”

“Sweet Jesus, I should have at least told you I am fine. I’m sorry Jaime. This is extremely important though.”

“Well, I just turned on the 202 East, still ten minutes before I get home. Why not start now. I’m all ears love.”

“I’ve been with Gellis Dunkan for the last two hours and she has done something and you are involved.”

Jaime was pushing the speed limit an extra fifteen miles per hour and suddenly felt the air evacuate from his lungs. “I’ll take an overview if ye please.”

Claire gave Jaime the short version and heard him pull up as she was done. Ten seconds later the door opened and he crossed to Claire and kissed her.

“Hello Jaime, I love yer wife and yer house. You look good.”

“Gellis, I’m sorry to hear about yer husband and what he did to ye. Claire says you have made magic with yer breeding business. Ye have Idle Dice’s mare, that’s impressive. Now, I wish ye the best, good luck in the future. I’ll walk ye to yer vehicle.” He held his arm out like he wanted her to start walking.
Gellis looked at Claire. “Jaime, Gellis has transferred ownership of the horses to you. All she wants is a flight back to Scotland.”

“I’ll no be part of forgery and stealin horses, no matter how good they are. I won’t risk my business and all I’ve worked for. Claire, yer not suggesting we do this, are ye? Ye could lose your medical license couldn’t ye?”

Jaime was looking at Claire like she lost her mind. “Please, mo chridhe, what are ye thinkin?” He was pleading with Claire to share his desire to put miles between Gellis and them.

Gellis walked toward Jaime. “I no longer owned the horses when the bank took possession of my property, you did. They were sold fairly and legally. My crime is changing their identities so they could stay at my barn while the bank dismantled my finances. You two are in the clear. Jaime I know you must keep an attorney on retainer. Before you allow this dam to die out there alone would ye please call someone and ask. Please.”

“What is it ye want Gellis,” he asked warily.

“Claire can fill you in on all that later. You have a phone call to make.”

Jaime slammed the study door making both women jump. Claire poured two whiskeys, gave one to Gellis and walked into the study to hand Jaime the other. She was relieved to hear that Jaime was talking to his attorney. She left to rejoin Gellis.

Claire sat down with a deep sigh of relief. And pressed her hands to the rolling thunder going on in her womb. Pup’s nose was pressed against her stomach.

“Oh, that’s just gross,” Gellis said making a face. “Where’s the damn whiskey?”

The women sat and waited hoping Jaime would emerge before the pressure in the room crushed them both. After twenty minutes the door opened and Jaime looked shell shocked. Where exactly are the horses Gellis and where are ye stayin?”

“Claire has the addresses for the horses and I’m staying at the Extended Stay in Mesa. I was hoping you would get me back to Scotland in exchange for the horses.” She spoke quietly looking at the floor.

“I will. Are ye ready to leave tonight?” Please go back to your hotel. Ye can’t be seen near the horses or us. We will bring them back safely, no matter what. I’ll book yer flight for tonight so be ready. If ye havena been charged with anything I’m not breakin the law to help ye. Ye have to go tonight.”

Claire finally found her brain. “Why is the Mare in an open pasture. I thought you said they have been at your barn this whole time?”

“The bank posted notices for all borders to be out by yesterday. I made excuses for the colt who is there alone with no food or water.”

“Why dinna ye tell us sooner Gellis? Ye were waiting for a last minute hail-Mary is what ye were doin. Waiting has put everything in jeopardy. I’ll be amazed if the colt is even there anymore.”

Gellis blinked hard to push the tears out of her eyes. She deserved his wrath for the way she handled these two special horses. She didn’t have a defense except for selfishness.

They all walked back to the barn and Jaime started connecting Claire’s trailer.
Claire hugged Gellis. “All the bad is over now. We will take good care of them and you will start again in Scotland. Be well and happy.” Gellis drove away and the women would never see each other again.

Claire climbed into the truck and talked to the navigation system. “There better be one gorgeous mare alone in a pasture when we get there.” She said.

They walked through the pasture, each with a lead, and called for her. The property was enormous and she could have been anywhere. Claire was getting nervous that she wasn’t there, or worse had foaled with problems. Jaime stopped her with an arm across her chest. “Listen Sassenach.” Jaime pointed to horse galloping over the hills toward them. He laughed and clucked to her. “Come my beauty!” She ran straight for them and Jaime pushed Claire behind him. She stopped dead, ten feet from him and snorted.

“Ah, yer a hungry lass. No food for the beauty in two days huh?” He lapsed into Gaelic and hushed his voice. He didn’t rush her but turned his back on her and reached for the apple Claire brought. He turned back to her and took a noisy bite before holding it out to her. The mare accepted the offering and a lead was snapped making Claire exhale the breath she was holding. Jaime continued talking to her, just above a whisper and close to her head. While he spoke he stroked her neck and back and visually checked her out.

“Sassenach, by my estimation she’s ready to drop. Stress right now will jeopardize the foal. We go extra slow, aye? How many apples do ye have?”

Claire smiled, “I have a whole bag of apples,” she said handing him one. Claire gave them a wide birth and watched Jaime work his magic on the scared horse. “Gellis said she’s been pampered and loved since she dropped. Then yesterday they hauled her out here and left her. Poor thing. I stuffed four flakes into each feeder in the trailer so once she is in she’ll be busy and happy.”

“Did ye hear that lassie. A feast for a princess waitin for ye in the trailer.” He turned and walked to the trailer and the mare followed much to his relief. “If Gellis was true to form this horse should be trailer broke and docile loading.” Jaime was grateful at that point for Gellis’s ground manners training. He really never saw the need before now. This mare was like a balloon stuffed with mud which could break very easily putting her life in peril.

Jaime oozed confidence and horses responded to him favorably because of it. He sensed her hesitation and turned her in a circle ten feet from the ramp. He talked to her the entire time.

“I know yer old man, Idle Dice. I beat him three years ago, but don’t bring it up as he’s still a bit sore about it.” On the third approach, she dropped her head and Jaime walked her up the ramp and snapped her into her dinner.

“Thank God” Claire breathed. “Do we get the colt now?”

“No, let’s not push our luck. We’ll get her settled and then get the colt. He touched her face with sympathetic eyes. “I know, he is hungry and afraid, but resilient where she is not. We will lay tread on the road as soon as… what’s her name anyway?”

“Her registered name is Holland’s Star but Gellis called her Star,” she answered.

“C’mere Sassenach.” Jaime pulled her to him and kissed her deeply until she was panting. “I want to see your expressions until I take my last breath. Yer face tells me what yer feelin inside and it’s always love mo chridhe.” He kissed her again and wanted to finish their duties and lay with her in the quiet of their bed.
Claire led Star into a birthing stall with a feeder full of grain, sweet feed, and vitamins. The mare dug in and chewed contently. Claire led Fred and Ginger to stalls on either side of Star. They would help lower her stress level.

Claire was holding Jaime’s hand lightly pulling him to exit the barn. Star was fine for now and they could rescue the baby and feed him. “Jaime please.”

They drove up the long driveway to the barn and Claire’s head was out the window listening for him. “He’s over there!” She pointed and the trailer came to a stop.

“Sassenach, he’s newly weened from his mother and hungry. I doubt Gellis has had time for etiquette lessons with the wee one. This could get a bit rocky.” Jaime was trying to gauge all of the delicate entities around him, including his wife so close to birth herself. “How do ye feel?” Claire stared out the windshield at the crying baby, “ready, so let’s get him.” She grabbed the bag of apples and some hay from the feeder and they walked toward the barn. The sun was setting and their eyes adjusted slowly to the light.

Claire entered his stall and stood very still, humming a lullaby. She used her teeth to put a groove in the apple and then twisted it sharply putting a section in the feeder along with the hay she brought. The baby was still crying, like a high pitched whiny, for his mother, but showing interest in the food. Claire held a clump of hay out to him. The colt stretched his neck to smell the food and inch by inch came closer. Claire looked at the ground and gave him the time to trust. The crying stopped suddenly and the colt’s head was completely into the feeder gorging himself.

“Thank God,” Claire breathed. She tried to stifle a yawn not wanting to give Jaime any reason to wrangle the poor thing.

Jaime entered the stall and between bites had his little halter on and a lead attached. He tried to lead the colt out of the stall but he dug in and refused to move.

Claire had tears on her cheeks as she wrapped her body around the baby’s neck and spoke softly to him. “Your girlfriend is waiting to see you safe handsome. She will get very stressed if you don’t join her soon. Please baby, come with us so we can help you.”

As hard as Claire prayed for a miracle it was not going to be an easy load into the trailer. Jaime put his arms around Claire. “Do ye trust me Sassenach to know what’s best for the wee Romeo laddie?”

She looked up at him and smiled, “of course I do. Better to make short work of it and get him home.”

“That’s my girl,” he said smiling at her. “Now, if ye would take the lead up the ramp and stay in front of him by the length of the lead. I’ll not let him rush ye but stay to the side anyway. Ye ready mo chridhe?”

Claire held the end of the lead and jumped up on the ramp. The colt was pulling back with his head in the air when Jaime came behind him and like a linebacker, pushed into his back knee joints making his legs buckle. Jaime lifted the back end up off the ground while Claire pulled the lead to the ramp. The colt was absolutely undone by the time she snapped his halter into the ties. She cooed and stroked his neck. “You are such a good little prince,” she whispered.

It took some time but the colt finally accepted his torturous tether and started eating. Claire just barely scooted out of the trailer and snapped the safety locks. She was relieved home was just five miles away.

Jaime walked through the enormous barn with his flashlight and remembered his youth spent right
here when Gellis reigned supreme. He heard a load hit the floor and turned toward a red-faced Claire. “We should go before the colt does something awful.”

Jaime looked at the bag of feed she had carried and was horrified. “Sassenach, dinna lift so much weight!” He pulled the bag into his arms and they walked back to the trailer and one crying colt. Jaime scooped handfuls of the foal food into his feeder from the side window and baby looked with interest and started eating.

“There are eight more unopened bags and some tack if you want to grab them.”

Jaime helped his wife up into the truck dashed back to the barn. It took ten minutes for him to empty the feed and tack room and they were heading back home.

“Thank God,” Claire breathed when she pushed against Jaime.

“Sassenach, dinna fash this old man. Are ye all right?”

Claire yawned and put her face to his neck. “Never better.”

An hour after the truck was turned off Jaime wiped sweat from his forehead. The prince, now with a full belly, was not interested in descending the ramp and Jaime’s insistence had gained him a few bruised ribs and a broken toe. He finally caved and called Angus.

“I’m sorry Angus to be askin this of ye but I canna do it alone. I’ve a prized stud in the trailer and he won’t budge. I need yer help.”

“No problem Jaime! The big dummy is with me, five minutes.”

The three men, hands on their hips, breathing heavy, stared down little prince. They were all covered in sweat, except for the colt who seemed fresh as a daisy.

“It’s a bit of a risk Jaime but ye might have to bring the mare out here to talk some sense into the lad.”

In the end, that is exactly what worked. They walked her alongside the trailer where he could see her and he whinnied for her.

“Aye, the laddie’s in love with her big butt already and he’s only four months old. That’s a good laddie.” Rupert chuckled.

“There’s yer girlfriend ye little idiot.” Jaime unsnapped the trailer tie and held on for dear life. The colt pulled him off his feet and backed up as Angus ran to get the ramp under his descending feet. With Jaime being dragged and Angus risking life and limb to push him onto the ramp, Rupert snapped a lead on his little halter and his feet hit the dirt finally. All three men were panting for air and Claire, comfortable on a bale of hay almost peed in her pants from laughing. The colt pushed himself into Star and glared at the men.

When both new arrivals were safe in their stalls and Prince had threatened Fred to stay away from his girlfriend, Jaime took Claire’s hand and walked her home. All the commotion had brought Shawn into the barn and the three men sat down for a game of poker and babysitting.

Claire was so tired she barely felt the shower or Jaime soaping her hair. He looked at her, so ripe in pregnancy, and realized he never loved her more than he did at that moment. He dried her skin and hair and pulled the covers up to her chin.
“I want this to be over Jaime. Please pray that the baby exits my body soon.” She yawned and tried to look up at him but her eyelids won the battle. She was asleep, chasing her dreams already.

The mare foaled two days later after four hours of labor. Jaime’s vet checked on her and decided to stay in case there were complications. Dr. Vickie Anderson was one of Jaime’s favorite people and he teased her about all the other horses that were sick and needing her care. Vickie took the ribbing with a smile, “it’s the colt or filly of Idle Dice, think I’d miss this? Jaime was extremely relieved she stayed. He had been in the breeding business for about forty-eight hours so far. Not quite an expert yet.

Claire stayed close to Star and calmed her as best she could. She loved Vickie and was happy to hunker down with her and wait. Sarah came by to check in and take Fred out for a therapy session. Ruby came screaming in between each horse to peer into the stall and bolt back out to the other barn.

Vickie got up on her knees and said it was time. Star was bearing down. After thirty minutes the filly was born in the bag and Vickie went to work tearing it open and clearing her nose and throat so she could breathe. Vickie rubbed her body vigorously, Star whinnied to her daughter, and Claire cried at how sweet it was. Star stood up and inspected her little baby.

For the next thirty minutes, the filly would make a great effort to stand only to land back in the straw. Everyone gathered at the stall and watched the baby try to stand. Once she finally got her legs under her she wobbled until Star positioned herself so the wee one just had to turn her head and suck.

Vickie collected what birth data she could and took several pictures that would show her unique markings. She walked out of the stall with misty eyes and Jaime took full advantage.

“What’s got in yer eyes lass? Could those be tears of joy? Better not be or I’m kickin ye out of the boys club here.” He hugged Vickie and thanked her. A successful birth. It was a start.

It would be three more long weeks of waiting before Jaime heard a startling cry in the dead of night. “Christ almighty!” She screamed. Jaime shot off the bed and ran to help his wife. First downstairs, then hearing her scream again, he took three stairs at a time getting back to the bed. “What is it Claire!”

“Your daughter wants to meet you I think. We better go right away. Aaah! The birth instructor said there would be a build up of pressure and pain but I swear her head is between my legs already.” She lurched forward and cried out. “Jaime, hurry, get the truck, we have to go now.”

Jaime was willing himself to calm down. He jumped in his clothes, calmed Pup and got Claire downstairs and into the truck. He called ahead and told the hospital what Claire said and the level of her pain.

“Oh my God Jaime!” Claire screamed and Jaime saw what looked like gallons of water come out of his wife.

“Ah diah! Her water broke and she’s puffing.” Jaime was out of his mind with worry. “She says the bairns coming now and we are still ten miles away.”

“Jaime!” Claire’s scream was blood-curdling and the nurse told him to pull over and prepare for birth, she was dispatching an ambulance at once.

Jaime pulled over into the gravel and got out of the truck. He helped Claire lay down on the seat and then ran around to the other side pushing her knees up.

Claire was panting something to Jaime and he realized she was telling him to turn on the blue tooth.
It took a couple minutes before he could hear the nurse talking to Claire through the speakers in the cab. Then she spoke to Jaime.

“I’m going to call you Jaime for brevity.” She was speaking quickly and telling Jaime to push Claire’s knees open and tell her what he saw.

He was close to passing out when he saw the head of the bairn crowning between Claire’s legs. He had never been so scared in his life. He felt Claire’s hand on his and pressed into the cab so he could look at her. “Mo chridhe.” He had tears flowing down his cheeks and he was amazed at how calm she was.

Claire held his hand and smiled. She asked him to be her hero and help their baby daughter make her entrance. She spoke very quietly and then she would bear down for a contraction. “It’s time for her father to catch her. Now Jaime, catch her!”

Jaime scooted out of the truck and was six inches from the emerging human. He coached Claire, telling her when to push and he gently held her knees apart.

He heard the nurses voice. “You are doing fantastic Jaime the ambulance should be there any minute. I want you to take off your shirt. When the baby comes out wrap your shirt around it and hold it close to your body for warmth.

“Claire screamed like she was dying, “catch her Jaime!”

Everything was slow motion for Jaime after that. His huge hands were waiting to hold her close and protect her. Claire’s last heroic push shot the baby into his arms and it started wailing. Jaime pulled the tiny body around to fit snugly in his arm and wrapped his shirt around it.

The sirens were coming, Claire was crying, and Jaime had delivered his own daughter. His eyes went wide and his face went white suddenly. His daughter had a penis and there was pee coming out of the penis and soaking his shirt. And his son wailed.

Claire, sweetheart, dinna ken quite what to say… it’s a laddie.

“What?!”

The ambulance came to a halt and three EMT’s and one doctor came rushing out. The doctor told Jaime he did a great job helping his son into the world. One of the EMT’S guided Jaime to stand aside while they delivered the after birth and cut the cord. The baby was swaddled and placed in the portable incubator and Claire was transferred to a portable gurney.

While all these men worked in unison for the safety of his wife and child Jaime was rooted in his prayer of thanks. The cool evening made his tears sting his face and he blinked hard because he couldn’t lose sight of Claire. His love, and now a new love to share with her. The miracle was not lost on a new father that night.

One of the EMT’S ended up driving the truck and Jaime to the hospital. Jaime just couldn’t come back to earth for such a mundane task. He watched them work on his son as he wailed, turning bright red when they poked his foot. He was content to let his eyes bounce from his wife to his bairn until the end of time.

Claire was still asking everyone if it really was a boy. “If he has ten fingers and toes I don’t care.” She felt a warm hand close over hers and looked up at Jaime’s beautiful face. “Thank you Jaime,” she breathed and her tears came like a dam had broken.
“My love, dinna cry, it’s over, we are all safe, our son is safe and ye are safe. Smile for me mo chridhe.” He brushed the tears off her cheeks and smiled at her. “Everything is more than fine and my heart might burst at any moment.” He leaned down and kissed Claire pressing his head to hers. They stayed in that embrace for several minutes.

“Mr. Fraser, would you like to hold your son?”

Jaime pushed the gown up on his shoulders and opened his arms as the nurse showed him the best position to hold and transfer the newborn. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the bairn. Claire couldn’t tear her eyes away from Jaime.

The doctor pushed Claire’s feet into stirrups and turned his headlamp on. I’m going to close your tearing with a few stitches doctor Fraser.”

“Don’t be stingy with those stitches doctor. I’ll be calling you in six weeks to either compliment you or … well, let us not dwell on a stingy procedure, ye ken? You see this giant Scott standing next to me?” The doctor looked up laughing. “I am going to rock his world if you do this right.”

The doctor had to physically hold his laughter in because Claire was like a stand-up comedian. She continued and soon the nurses were undone with laughter. It was rare to see a surgeon of her specialty so high on morphine and the birthing room got a taste of the no-brake Sassenach.

Jaime had dropped into a plush lazy boy and was rocking his son hearing nothing but his Gaelic prayer. Seeing nothing but the face of his child. Look da, he thought, ye will live forever with mam through him. I feel what ye felt, I hope what ye hoped, I fear what ye feared, I love my son like ye loved me. Now I know a father’s love.
Chapter 44

“Mr. Fraser, would you like to introduce your son to his mother? We want him to nurse and bring in her milk. The doctor is taking so long to stitch her up we might have to horn in on his time.”

Jaime carried his son to Claire and kissed her forehead. Claire opened her eyes and had a brilliant smile for her husband.

“I have a beautiful baby that needs to suckle his mother.” Jaime smiled as he lowered the baby to her. The nurse was helping to open Claire’s gown and position the baby. Claire looked at her son for the first time and pressed on her breast to bring her nipple to his mouth. The baby was asleep so she lightly ran her finger down his cheek and side of his mouth causing him to turn his face in that direction and open his mouth. She continued this until he latched onto her nipple and started to suck.

Claire was absolutely in love with this tiny human and afraid to move an inch and disrupt this critical first meal. Jaime watched them both and the sight was not lost on the nurse in charge who tried not to stare but finally gave in. The doctor finally emerged from between Claire’s legs and pulled off his gloves. He put a hand on her knee and smiled. Claire smiled back and the doctor went on to the next new mother.

The nurse turned off the bright examination lights leaving soft light around the bed. “I’ll be back in ten minutes Claire. Let him doze if he wants and then change sides and stimulate his rooting reaction again.” She smiled at them and vacated the room.

Claire looked at Jaime with all the love and happiness in her heart. “Thank you for being so brave, Jaime. Are you alright love?”

Jaime kissed her lips, “never better, never ever better. Will it be too disturbing if I call Jenny?”

“Oh my God, do a video chat! It’s still daytime in Scotland.” Claire instructed Jaime to get her phone where the app was already installed and dialed in. Jaime placed the call and heard Jenny tell him to move the phone away from his ear so she could see him. He did it just in time to see her roll her eyes at him.

“Jenny! Look at what Claire just did.” He turned the phone toward Claire and the Baby and Jenny was very quiet for several minutes as she watched her nephew suckle for the first time. When she spoke Jaime could hear her voice heavy with tears. “How are ye sister?”

Claire looked toward the phone and they both cried and spoke of the birth and surprise sex of the baby. Ian had joined Jenny and was smiling ear to ear. “I promise to erase yer wife’s boob from my memory as soon as we hang up Jaime,” he said laughing. “That is a beautiful boy ye got there.”

“Oh, Claire, how is it no one kent it was a boy after nine months of sonograms? I must have had at least six or more with wee Jaime.”

“I opted out of sonograms unless medically necessary. The debate about the safety and necessity of the procedure still rages so I didn’t have it done again. Now I’m stuck with lots of pink outfits that have had the tags removed already. I know, I’ll save them for you, Jenny! Do you know the sex of the baby yet?”

Jenny was coming apart at the seams, “it’s a girl!”

Claire smiled at Jenny’s happy face and missed her terribly. “If you say no to any more sonograms I
will ship a pink wardrobe to Scotland. I am going to move this guy to the other side and I don’t want to give Ian too much to forget so look at your brother for a couple minutes. He needs to tell you what he did for his wife and son last night.”

Jaime explained the birth on the side of the road and both Jenny and Ian were clearly amazed. Jaime blushed, “it was Claire who made the miracle but I am so happy I could help her.” Then he launched into an explanation of seeing the baby’s penis for the first time and not knowing how to tell Claire. Ian had some fun with that bit of news making Claire giggle. Jaime looked at Claire’s eyelids starting to droop and said a Gaelic goodbye in a hushed voice.

Mother and son were both dozing giving him time to look at them. A tear rolled down his face, then another and another. The nurse came in quietly and lifted the baby back to its bed. Jaime excused himself and left the room quickly, finding a dark hallway to wrestle with his emotions. After five minutes the nurse touched his back and asked if he was alright.

“Tears of joy and tears of sadness look different Mr. Fraser. Your tears are sad so I thought I would ask if you need to talk about it.” She spoke quietly and Jaime was touched by her compassion.

“Claire has no family to call and share our news. Not a parent, sibling, aunt or uncle. She has no one.” Never was the loss of her parents more unbearable to him and his tears went unabated. “I’m sorry to be weak about it and I dinna want her to see me sad for her.”

The nurse searched her mind for something to say to this man who was so connected to his wife. “She has a family of her own now Mr. Fraser and it will heal whatever remains of her loss. I have seen thousands of couples interact through birth in my career and there’s a reason I couldn’t stop staring at the three of you. It’s that rare and beautiful to see. Most new mothers are demanding their baby the moment it’s born but Claire just watched you hold your son and got lost in your joy. When she finally closes her eyes to rest you cry for her loss. The baby is God’s second miracle. His first was when you two met. Take a deep breath and let it go. When she wakes up help her call her girlfriends so she shares the news.”

Jaime smiled gratefully at her and they walked back to the quiet birthing room.

By eight o’clock Angus and Rupert were pacing the length of the arena with their cell phones in their hands. Each of them checked and rechecked waiting for news from Jaime.

Angus threw his arms in the air clearly disgruntled at the lack of news. “Why hasna he called yet!”

Rupert passed Angus pacing in the other direction and for the first time in his life was at a loss for words. He kept his head down and kept walking.

Ruby breezed in with a freshly washed face and peered in at the new filly. She noticed her friends were walking the length of the arena and offered to find a long tape measure with the observation it would be more accurate. Then it hit her right in the stomach. “What is wrong Angus, what’s happened?”

He looked up at Ruby showing his concerned face. “Jaime isna here, Pup isna here, no notes on the board because Jaime hasna been here since last night. Claire is havin the baby.”

“What?” Ruby took off out of the barn.

Rupert watched her, “where is that daft lass runnin to?”

“The lass will run in circles for a while, ye ken. Then she’ll be back to pace with us.”
Ruby was back after five minutes still breathing hard from her nonproductive sprint. “Claire’s truck is gone so what do we do?” She sat on a flat-topped jump and looked anxious.

When Sarah walked in with a lead in hand she looked at the three of them. “What’s wrong with you guys? Oh shit, Claire is in labor isn’t she?” She joined the group with her cell phone in hand.

Jaime pulled the lazy boy up to Claire’s bed and was asleep with his head next to hers and an arm across her. Leaving her was not an option so he put his head down and sleep took him instantly. Sometime later he felt Claire’s cool touch on his cheek.

“Jaime love,” she whispered, “would you bring the baby to me please?”

Jaime lifted his head and smiled at his wife, then he heard the squeaks and grunts of one newborn waking up. He jumped to his feet and shook his head to clear it.

“He just started feeling his empty tummy so don’t panic.” She was so happy she would see him in mere moments. “If you would grab him and maybe a diaper and a cloth and bring them to me?”

Jaime pulled his swaddled son into his arms and noticed tiny balled fists flailing in the air. The baby’s unhappiness was growing along with his cries for food and Jaime laid him at Claire’s breast. She touched his cheek and he turned his face into her and latched onto a nipple. He was instantly quiet and Jaime exhaled the breath he was holding.

Jaime took his phone out and recorded several sweet minutes of mother and baby. Then he snapped at least twenty pictures of them. His message light was blinking and he chuckled at the numerous messages from the team. “Yer fans are demanding information Sassenach.” He sent a quick text and copied them all.

‘Claire is doing fine. It’s not a girl. I delivered baby on the side of Apache Blvd at 3 AM. Baby=bonnie and braw. Check in later, Rupert=barns, Angus=horses, Ruby=ride, cover for me=bonuses, Sarah=download facetime, yer gonna want to see this. He clicked send after attaching one of his pictures taken a moment ago.

The team looked at their phones at the same time, silence, joy and shouting, jumping up and down, and relief with a super size of smiling. Sarah glanced at her phone again. Sarah=Pup…please. Sarah laughed and headed up to the house to rescue Pup.

When the alarm went green with a beep Sarah pushed the door open expecting Pup to launch himself at her but he wasn’t there. She called to him…no Pup. Sarah’s heart rate shot up wondering if he ran out when they were leaving. She took two stairs at a time and stopped in her tracks when she entered their bedroom. “Oh Pup.”

Pup’s head was on the mattress and his eyes darted around the room like he was terrified. His tail was under him and he did not move when Sarah sat next to him. She stroked him and he cried.

“Pup sweetheart. Claire is fine, baby is fine. Did you get scared with all the commotion last night?” Sarah’s heart was breaking at his sad face and she dropped to the floor and hugged him. “It’s okay Pup, let’s go outside, go see Jag.” But he wouldn’t move. He just cried so quietly she could barely hear him.

Sarah tempted Pup with water and food and his leash, which meant a ride in the car, his favorite. He didn’t move. Sarah sent a text to Jaime. Pup=scared, sad, won’t move from bed. Claire=video call. She hastily downloaded the app for facetime and read the setup instructions like a speed reader. Ten minutes later she hit connect and saw her best friend’s happy face.
“You did good little mama and so did dad!” When Claire giggled Pup’s head jerked up and he started running around the room and spinning in circles. When he couldn’t find Claire he barked in the direction of her voice making Claire giggle some more. Sarah turned the phone toward him not knowing if dogs would understand and look at the screen but she gave it a shot.

Pup sat down instantly and stared at the phone. “You are the best boy! Don’t be scared darling Pup everything is so great.” She smiled at him and she saw she was alive and happy. “I will be home tomorrow Pup and I have a big treat for you.”

Pup suddenly went berserk running up and down the stairs making Sarah laugh. When Claire saw Sarah’s face again she turned the phone toward her nursing son and heard Sarah gasp. “No, no, no, don’t move the phone I haven’t seen him enough! The baby had his little fists balled tightly, eyes closed showing milk collecting at the corners of his mouth. “Oh my God, he is beautiful Claire,” she breathed. The phone was slowly moving down and then jerking up again. Sarah saw Jaime’s big hand wrap around the phone and then his tired face.

“Claire is sleepy right now but thank ye Sarah for helpin with Pup. Is he better?” Sarah almost cried at the sight of him, so drawn and exhausted. “Yes he is back to normal and a bit more. You get some rest too Jaime.” Then her standard goodbye, “over and out.” Sarah clicked off to save Jaime the small talk of goodbye. She sat on the bed and just smiled staring out the window. Miracles came in many forms, but in each, she saw the hand of God and prayed her thanks. Jaime smiled at the phone in his hand, ever grateful for Sarah’s no-nonsense personality.

Sarah was Pup’s second mother and Ruby his third. It seemed like once he heard and saw Claire it was game on for him and he barreled down the road to see Jag. After fifty licks at the half-door, he ran into the second arena following Ruby’s scent. She was unprepared for the crash and was soon launched onto the new arena floor with a big brown dog play biting her neck. Angus and Rupert were unmoved by the spectacle and ignored her screaming laughter. Sarah looked on and shook her head. All is well, she thought, time to go to work.

Claire’s maternal knock was pulling her out of sleep and she heard her son grunt and squeak for a minute while her eyes adjusted to the sudden colors that filled the room. Baby did not share her interest and made his empty stomach known to the two adults that would become the most important people in the world to him.

Jaime was feeling more confident and quickly changed his diaper and tried to swaddle the writhing ball of flesh and noise. He gave up and gently laid him at his mother’s breast. The piercing noise stopped abruptly making Claire giggle. “You are your father’s son!” She said through giggles.

“How in the world did everyone find out already?”

Jaime answered as he pillaged the bounty, “the barn calls are forwarded to Rupert’s phone until tomorrow. So, prepare for more, aye?” He spread the food on the bed around her and they ate and kissed each other, and baby….

“Claire, we canna call him Cheyenne, he isna a lass. We never thought about names for a laddie!”
“I think I have it covered,” she looked up at Jaime, “do you like Ian, or Brian?”

Jaime looked at his son. “Ian Brian Fraser.” He put his hand on the wee one’s head when he said it and Claire smiled her agreement.

Claire was laying on her side facing Jaime and the baby nursed and punched the air between them. She pulled his soft blanket over him and tucked it under him tightly. He sucked and dozed and she settled in to doze herself.

Jaime was watching her with rapt attention and pulled his gaze to his phone to send a message. He glanced at Claire who was watching him. She raised her eyebrows in question. “I’m reminding Rupert to assist Vickie when she comes today to check on Star.”

“Please go and help her Jaime.” Star now owned a piece of Claire’s heart and she worried about the mare. “I promise I won’t let Ian speak or take his first step until you get back.” She watched Jaime wrestle with the decision.

“If that is what you want me to do Sassenach.” He smiled.

“Cuddle with Pup, an apple for Fred, Ginger, Jag, and Donus.” She was fighting sleep. “and a nap in our bed for at least an hour.” She was breathing deeply in sleep for several minutes. “hot food.”

Jaime carefully pulled Ian to his bed and swaddled him tightly before laying him on his side. He looked at his precious son and spoke quietly in Gaelic, “mo mhac agus mo chridhe.”
Chapter 45

Jaime struggled to hold the Prince while Vickie examined him. He did not think the colt was thriving and Vickie agreed. He was dehydrated, underweight, shelly hooves, and a bacterial odor in his mouth.

“My guess is he was weaned abruptly and the stress of separation from his mother has tapped his immune system and appetite. Let’s change his supplements to a weight gainer and add folic acid for his feet and mouth. The colt and filly will use the same supplement. We can re-evaluate in six weeks.”

Later when Jaime walked to his office in the other barn he caught a glimpse of Angus calling changes to Ruby. He was surprised at her improvement and her unending passion for riding. It only took five minutes for him to see her strength clearly and it would not be eventing. Whether or not she could accept the change would determine if Ruby could be a champion someday. It is difficult to tell someone they have built their dreams in the wrong discipline, sometimes impossible. As soon as he could, he would take her to the cross country in Gilbert and let the course tell her.

Jaime had asked Missy, Lances wife, to make a list of equipment that might help Claire and baby when they got home. He expected her any minute. When someone knocked he looked up to find Rupert and Shawn.

“Laddies! Sit down I need a few minutes to thank ye both for what ye’ve done. Tis impressive and I’m grateful.”

Rupert opened his mouth to speak and Jaime realized Shawn’s face had become a deep Scottish crimson. “We didna ken that the laddie here is quite an accomplished rider.” Rupert began. “He has won championships and all kinds of awards and trophies in Scotland.”

Shawn’s color had not normalized and Jaime was intrigued. “Why not tell us, Shawn?” Jaime leaned forward playfully, “Is it because ye ride for the other side Shawny?”

Both Shawn and Rupert looked up startled. “Did someone tell ye that Jaime?” Rupert asked with wide eyes.

“No, I can tell by the way ye walk lad. I’d love to see ye sometime but who do ye ride for?”

Jaime had long suspected that Shawn was a western rider, and a good one, and wondered how long it would be his secret. “I’ve long admired yer sport and the heart required to excel in it. So fill me in on what yer doin.”

Rupert looked at Shawn and prayed he would speak up. This was very important for all of them.

“I was ridin alternate for West World but there’s a bunch of lads and lasses that are fed up with the changes over there and we’re lookin for a new barn. That would be team ropers, bronce riders, lassie barrel racers, and …”

Jaime held up his hand. “How many horses?”

Shawn looked at the ground, “fifteen to twenty want to move now.”

“Are there any pro’s in the group?”
“Jess Lockwood is in our group. He’s pro but no championship yet.”

“He will be. This is his year.” Jaime told him. “The lad is just hittin his stride. Anything else you want me to ken?”

“The Sheriff’s posse riders want to leave also. It’s a group of old men who ride for the Sheriff in parades, they’re like a club.”

“Jesus, what did West World do to piss off so many people?”

“They brought in two big dressage riders and pulled support of the rodeo riders. This was arranged by the new manager who is runnin all kinds of boarders off, ye ken?”

Jaime saw Missy waiting patiently outside his office and promised to get back to Shawn when they got home tomorrow. Missy came in and gave Jaime a hug. For the next thirty minutes, she described the most useful baby equipment for a newborn.

Jaime looked at his list. “I need a cradle for our room, a rockin chair, a swinging basket,”

Missy interrupted him, “ah…that would be a swinging bassinet.”

“baby monitors, tons of diapers, three dozen cloth diapers, ten soft receiving blankets, an emergency bottle, liners, and Similac. I should ask Claire about a breast pump.” Jaime made a face, “sounds painful.”

“One more thing Jaime. Lance and I want to lend you our cradle. It was made by Lance's dad when Jackson was born. He is an artisan. The cradle is so well balanced it will rock forever with the slightest movement. Will you use our cradle for baby Ian?”

“We thank ye, Missy. I can’t wait to see it.” Jaime smiled.

Jaime was so anxious to get back to Claire after his shopping trip to Scottsdale. He bought everything on Missy’s list and now he just wanted to hold his wife and son.

He pushed the door open quietly and almost laughed out loud at all the flowers. There were stacks of blue and white onesies, the tiniest socks Jaime had ever seen and something he would treasure. A small painting of a pregnant Claire staring out a window. The sunlight bathed her face and neck. So much detail in her face, hair, and upper body faded to washed out shapes and colors for the rest of the painting. It was outstanding.

He heard the grunts of his son waking up and he looked down at his tiny legs kick and recoil as he slipped a clean diaper on his little butt. Ian was rooting on Jaime’s hand and started to cry in earnest when the expected milk did not flow.

Jaime smiled at her and laid Ian at her breast. Once the baby was settled, he walked to the other side of the bed, kicked his boots off, lowered the guard, and spooned his wife breathing her in. “I dinna ken it’s right to miss anyone as I missed ye today mo chridhe. I promise to vacate yer bed once I’ve held ye for a few minutes.”

Claire turned her head smiling at Jaime, “kiss.” His kiss was soft and he laid his hand on her hip deepening the kiss.” Claire took a deep breath and felt Jaime vaporize. Her eyes flew open in shock looking around for her husband. She found him ten feet away and he was walking to the door.

“Jaime, where are you going?”
“I, I… do ye need a breast pump Claire? I, they only had one and I need to buy it. Right now.” He
opened the door and left Claire looking at him like he had lost his mind.

Jaime was swearing in Gaelic while he searched for the doctor who attended Claire. The doctor
looked up and saw Jaime approach with a crimson blush that was spreading across his cheeks.

“Six weeks.” The doctor said when Jaime cleared his throat. “You have to wait six weeks before
having sex. How long a courtship have you guys had?”

Jaime was clearly confused, “I met her a year and a half ago.”

The doctor screwed up his face, “ooh, well, cold showers actually work. If you are suffering, take a
look at her episiotomy. I put so much cat gut in there yesterday the sight of it might kill your arousal
for a month or more.” He laughed, “ya, it’s pretty gross looking.”

“What?” Jaime’s eyes were huge. The doctor was having the conversation without him but seemed
to be talking about the subject in Jaime’s mind. Unwanted arousal. “Thank ye, doctor.”

“One more thing. Learn from my mistakes,” he said and lowered his voice. “I struggled with it
myself and was only too happy to let my wife take care of me while she recuperated. Ya… don’t do
that. When it’s over I’m asleep, she’s aroused and uncomfortable, hasn’t slept much and will be up
with the baby all night.” He face looked scared and he shook his head no. “Don’t do it. The six-
week window we give is a guideline. Make sure it’s been at least four weeks and let Claire decide
when she’s ready. Good talk.” He punched Jaime’s arm and walk away briskly with a file in his
hand. Jaime wasn’t sure he had uttered a word during the whole conversation.

Jaime was overthinking his penis situation when he walked quietly back into Claire’s room. He
heard her sniffling and the alarm bells went off in his head. “Claire! What is it love?”

She sat up and threw her arms around his neck and cried because she missed him and wanted his
company.

“I’m sorry lass, I had to, to… speak to the doctor.” He exhaled and pulled her to him. “I’m sorry I left
like that. I love ye and can’t wait to take ye both home tomorrow.” He pushed her hair behind her
ears and looked into her eyes. He willed himself to relax, Claire needed his attention.

Jaime put Ian into his bed and laid down next to his wife, on his back, with no frontal contact. He
pulled her into his side and she pushed her face into his neck. “It was an interesting day mo chridhe.”
He spoke quietly and told her all about Prince, Star and the filly, Ruby’s ride, Missy’s list, his
shopping trip, borrowing the cradle, and Shawn’s request.”

“Vickie will fix the horses, how sweet of Lance and Missy! Ruby… I trust your eye to see the rider
in her so I think it’s up to Ruby to accept it or live like Don Quixote.”

“Who is this Don bloke then?”

Claire snuggled closer, “well known for fighting windmills, trying to make them go in the other
direction. Fighting the natural order of things.” She kissed his cheek and giggled at his weird face.
“The rodeo riders will fill the new barn. It will be hard to turn down that income I’m sure. The
sheriff’s posse riders sound adorable and low key.”

“But Claire, won’t that dilute our mission? I don’t want to own a dude ranch.” He said miserably.

Claire giggled as quietly as she could but Jaime’s face was highly entertaining. “Sleep on it my love
and trust your impeccable instincts.”
She heard Jaime’s chuckle deep in his chest. “My instincts told me a nice lady doctor with two therapy horses would be a calming change to my barn’s competitive atmosphere and look how that went.” He laughed quietly when she hit his arm. “I’ll skip my instincts and go with logic Sassenach.” He kissed her forehead and settled into sleep.

Bringing baby home created a forever memory for Claire. She sat on the sofa with Ian next to her in his seat. Ian was still sleeping off his last meal. Pup sat watching her from ten feet away. She could see his stress and called him to her. He inched toward her, head down and tail tucked. She kissed his face at least fifty times and hugged him. His eyes were glued to the baby and he cried softly. He pushed his nose into Claire’s stomach for several minutes, waiting. The sounds in her womb were gone. He looked at her and then at Ian.

Claire eased down to the floor and placed Ian’s chair next to her. “It’s okay Pup. This is your new charge. We need to raise this baby. Me, Jaime, and you Pup. Come say hello.” Pup’s nose was working as he inched toward the baby. He sniffed his feet, hands, blanket, and head. He licked his head making Ian startle and Pup jumped back. “Yep, it moves,” Claire said giggling. She was feeling cramped in the study and Claire wanted to do this correctly. For Pup’s sake.

Jaime squatted next to Claire and kissed her with closed lips…again. “What can I do before goin to the barn love? Pup will come with me and ye can rest.”

“I don’t need anything. But I want to give Pup some time to adjust. If he runs after you to the door that’s fine. If he doesn’t, don’t call him. We’ll just hang out this afternoon.” She cupped his cheek with her hand and felt his hair still wet from a shower. “I love you.”

One more kiss and Jaime was gone. Pup laid close to Claire watching the baby. “It’s time for a Pup story but this room feels hot and stuffy. C’mon.” She put Ian’s chair up on the table and opened all the windows and back door for fresh air. She started a load of laundry and put the new boy clothes Sarah brought her in the nursery drawers. Although she had everything ready, she didn’t think this room would get much use for the first few months. It was just too far away.

Claire spread a sheet on the floor and grabbed Pup’s toy. She brought Ian’s chair down and then laid on the floor and started her story. Before she was done, Pup was asleep so Claire got up to transfer laundry and start another load. When she came back Pup had moved next to Ian where he lay on his paws. Claire smiled and continued to do chores throughout the afternoon always keeping Ian in sight.

When she missed Ian’s grunts and squeaks he started crying in earnest and Pup looked startled and worried. Claire slipped a clean diaper on him, kissing his cheeks several times amid the loud crying to show Pup it was nothing to be concerned about. She swaddled Ian and sat in her new rocking chair helping him find her nipple. Pup paid close attention to every movement and emotion. Claire started singing to Ian and Pup always looked peaceful when she sang.

“I’ve never felt this strong”
“[…]”
“[…]”
“[…]”
“[…]”
“[…]”

Claire laid Ian in the cradle and covered him. She slipped into bed, so happy to be back home. She pushed against Jaime’s naked body and felt him so far away. “Will you kiss me Jaime?”
“Of course my Sassenach.” His eyes were full of love and he kissed her with closed lips…again. She pulled him back to her lips and whispered what she wanted making Jaime melt into her and kiss her deeply. He laid on his back in the dark thinking his erection stopped right under his chin. He got up to pace downstairs. Walk around outside for a while and went back to try again. He could not stop thinking of sex when she was this close. He reached into his nightstand drawer.

Jaime pulled the sheet over his head and inched lower slowly so he wouldn’t wake Claire. He moved lower on the mattress and turned on his flashlight. Claire laid in a loose fetal position and Jaime moved the beam of light between her legs looking for “… sweet Jesus!” He didn’t mean to yell and Claire was suddenly awake, her leg crashing into Jaime’s mouth almost pushing the flashlight down his throat. She pulled the sheet away and saw Jaime examining her butt with a flashlight, covertly.

Jaime raised startled eyes to Claire, pulling the flashlight out of his mouth. He looked down at the mattress trying to rid his mind of the HD image now in his mind.

“What are you doing under there Jaime?”

His feeble attempts at joking didn’t work so he finally told Claire what the doctor suggested to cure his unwanted erection.

Claire was incredulous. “Well…did it work? I heard you shout something under there.”

Jaime could not bring himself to tell his wife her pussy now looked like Chucky’s face and he was ruined for life. He mumbled something about barely seeing anything before she kicked him. “Come here love.” He pulled her into a spoon with full frontal contact and kissed her shoulder. “I love ye lass and I’m sorry I woke ye.”
Jaime typed the words "window air conditioner" into Google and chewed a pencil. He was soaking wet from his sprint to close all the half doors and pull the big doors closed against a monsoon storm that raged into the valley. Temperatures had been over one hundred and ten degrees for two weeks straight and the team was nearly done in, as was he. He installed a barn-sized swamp cooler in the new barn and Shawn and Rupert ran copper tubing for the misters over there as well. Both systems were very helpful until the humidity climbed with the monsoon season and the true meaning of misery was felt by all.

They voted in the siesta schedule again this year but Jaime soon discovered it was Claire who kept them all on their toes and back on a horse at nine PM. After a couple of days they stopped coming back. It was alright. He chose not to buy greenies until September when the nights would at least be bearable so there was nothing that needed riding. If Ruby was at the barn at all she was on Shawn’s side riding his horses. The first time Jaime saw her in a western saddle he almost pulled her off of it. He warned her about ruining her seat and she promised that wouldn’t happen. He figured she would wrangle a riding lawn mower with nothing else to ride so he dropped it.

The thunder overhead was getting the horses nervous so Jaime abandoned the laptop and walked down the aisle with a wheelbarrow full of grass hay for all of them. Pretty much zero calories or nutrition but they were happy and calm if they were eating. He wheeled over to the new barn and pitched extra hay for Star and her filly. He watched the filly pick at the hay, swing her head and rear up at her mother in play. Prince was showing Jaime his back end and then launched a two-foot kick into the corral bars of his stall.

“Stop that, ye wee devil!” Jaime yelled. “Ye’ve earned yer new name sir asshole!” Loud thunder exploded above them and colt turned around and ran toward Jaime seeking comfort. He rubbed his neck and spoke to him in Gaelic before pitching him some hay.

Jaime cut across the indoor arena to the other line of stalls and chucked hay as his mind drifted. He thought about the tough decision he made about the western horses. Luckily he never had to disappoint Shawn because West World made concessions for the rodeo riders and most of them stayed there. The guys who left for the rodeo season moved their personal horses to the Center and paid Shawn to exercise them, which became Shawn and Ruby. Jaime accepted all the posse riders who wanted to come and there were now ten of them. It had all worked out well and he would have the extra income for the summer and no tarnish to his pristine vision of the Equestrian Center.

He listened to the rain coming down outside and decided to go home and enjoy it while he still could. He ran to his truck and made the short trip home but he was dripping from the two short runs to and from the truck. He decided he could not get any wetter so he walked around to the back and jumped into the lounge in time to see lightning bolts come straight to the ground in the desert beyond them. The storm had pushed cold air with it and the temperature had dropped at least forty degrees.

He felt beautiful hands in his hair. He had seen them before so he knew they were beautiful. He moaned with pleasure and closed his eyes. He felt the lightest kiss on his eyelids and felt her breath on his face. “This is just the surprise I wanted today.” Her voice was happy and she kissed his lips, several times and then jumped into the lounge and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Sassenach,” Jaime said laughing, “yer soaked through now.” He held her and closed his eyes feeling the cool drafts and loving the sound of the storm.

Claire pushed her body into her husband willing him to touch her. The baby was five weeks old now
and Jaime had somehow turned his sex drive completely off. She tried to make advances but he always held her and closed his eyes just like he was doing now. Her body was almost back to normal and she felt energetic and sexy again but he didn’t seem to notice her that way anymore. One night she put on a very short skirt and halter top to have dinner with him and purposely fed Ian right before he got home so they would have some alone time. He didn’t mention her clothes or how good she looked. She had pushed her insecurities out of her head but realized it was time for serious seduction before she lost her mind. While they enjoyed the rain she tried to think of a sure-fire plan to win Jaime’s lust back. She smiled to herself…bingo.

Jaime pushed himself back to the barn and Claire went into action. First a bubble bath and then shave almost everything. She blew her hair so it was full and silky before pulling it up into the high pony that made him weak. She pulled on tiny thong panties and her shortest soft shorts that didn’t quite cover the lower globes. Next, she put on her sexy black lace bra and prayed she wouldn’t spring a leak. Her top was so sexy she feared he would catch on to the seduction. It was fitted, sleeveless with a deep plunging front. The top came just to the bottom of her ribcage. She needed to make it real somehow. Another smile…another bingo.

She helped Ian drain her breasts completely by pumping herself when he was finished. She brushed on a thin coat of mascara and blush keeping the lip gloss close by for when she saw him walking home. She was cooking a roast and when she saw Jaime emerge from the barn she opened the oven door and stuck her head in as far as she could stand. Pup sat watching her and sprung up when he heard Jaime’s footfall. The front door opened and Jaime leaned down to kiss his flushed, and hot, wife.

“Sassenach, yer in a fever!” He pressed his hand to her forehead.

“Oh gosh no. Lance gave me some floor exercises to do to start getting back in shape,” she lied. She fanned her face and gave him a brilliant smile before handing him a beer. Jaime watched her move around the kitchen getting dinner ready to serve. “How did the afternoon go?” She leaned across the table giving him a perfect view of her enlarged breasts almost popping out of her shirt.

Jaime cleared his throat and gave a summary of the hot and dull afternoon. When Claire turned around to reach for a hot pad high on the bakers rack she made sure her back end was in clear view.

“There. Eat sweetheart.” Claire talked about Ian and Pup and her boredom and… Jaime had stopped hearing anything except his crotch saying “yummy.” Claire bounced up and down from her seat fetching items purposely left on the counter. She brought him another beer and noticed Jaime had gotten very quiet and was watching her with interest. So far so good.

She was so young, he thought, so animated and so beautiful. When she turned around his eyes feasted on her ass. Her shorts were so low he could see the dimples above her butt and the curve of her bare midriff. He wondered what her now ample breasts would feel like and how large her nipples were when a baby wasn’t sucking on them. He noticed she was about to fall out of her exercise top. He hoped that might happen. She was still smiling and talking to him and then suddenly she was up again clearing the dishes and putting a whiskey in his hand. He tried to listen and five minutes later he would try again to listen. His eyes were feasting on her breasts when he heard, “Jaime?” Uh-oh.

“Sassenach, how long has it been since ye tasted fine whiskey?” he held the glass up and compared the color to her beautiful eyes.

“Um, maybe nine or ten months, no nine.”

Jaime held the glass up to her lips and she took a drink, letting it stay on her tongue before she swallowed. He watched her and remembered their wedding night when he gave her a taste of
champagne before a long, hot, sexual night. He watched her lips and wanted to taste them. “Ye made a fine dinner Sassenach and I’m stuffed. Come sit with me on the sofa.” Claire sat down and Jaime reached for her bare feet and started to rub them. He watched Claire struggle to maintain her composure and not dive into the sensation sea she loved so much. “When did ye last feed Ian?”

“I put him down right before you walked in actually.” Well then, one more sip of this extraordinary whiskey Ian sent us won’t do any harm. He held the glass and she took another sip that spread warmth through her stomach and made her feel so relaxed. Jaime moved up to her calf and he noticed she was softer now, less muscled. Lance is gonna have a hayday with ye when ye get back, he thought.

“Sassenach, come here,” he said quietly and pulled her onto his lap so she straddled him. He pulled the tie out of her hair and noticed it was longer. God, how long has it been since I looked at my wife, he thought. He kissed her softly and held her head to his lips. He heard her breathe and deepened his kiss letting his tongue play with hers. “God mo chridhe ye taste so good.” He couldn’t get enough of her mouth all of a sudden and she seemed to be meeting his need with her own.

Jaime tempted her tongue until he felt it invade his mouth and he groaned crushing her to him. “I want ye Sassenach, will ye have me?” He picked her up before she could answer and carried her to the bedroom. He picked up the baby monitor on the way because Ian was in his crib downstairs. He laid on the bed with her and kissed her breathless while she unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. She pulled her own top off and let it fall to the floor while Jaime stared at her breasts almost popping out of her lacy bra. “My God yer beautiful.”

It took a long time to get naked but neither noticed. They were celebrating a reunion and neither wanted to rush. Claire prayed Ian would play his part and stay asleep.

Jaime pulled her under him and locked his eyes on hers. “If ye change yer mind mo chridhe just say stop.” When Claire nodded Jaime got between her legs and pushed against her testing her willingness. He heard her exhale and the quietest moan. “Jaime, I want you, I’m ready.” He pushed into her so slowly. Stopping with every inch to watch her face and eyes. Claire wrapped her arms around him and lifted her pelvis to him. “Deeper…please,” she breathed.

Jaime watched this magnificent girl invite him to possess her body and was overwhelmed with her beauty and her desire for him. He kissed her breathless as he pushed deeper until Claire was panting and wrapping her legs around his waist. He didn’t know how to touch her all of a sudden. Their lovemaking had always been so easy and now he was lost. As he pushed, she raised her pelvis so he would slide against her throbbing. He pushed an arm under her to hold her up and ground against her making her gasp.

“Come for me Sassenach.” Another push and grind while he watched her with rapt attention. “Let me feel how much ye want me,” another push and rotation of his hips against her. Claire was panting for him and suddenly arched her back with a long moan of his name. He felt her muscles squeeze him and pushed into them shuddering with his release. He watched her face and felt his world tilt back to normal after pushing back on himself for almost two months. They laid in each other's arms panting for breath, smiling with love, and both so relieved the abstinence was over.

“Now I ken ye love me Sassenach, I smell like a horse and no mention of it!” Jaime laughed and sighed deeply like the first clear, clean breath in a long time. “I know a guy who has a dandy shower with three heads for water. Want to meet him mo chridhe?”

Jaime worked the shampoo into Claire hair and scalp with his strong hands. She leaned into him with a smile that he continued to kiss about every other minute. The cool water rinsed through her hair and he kissed her deeply. Jaime dried her skin and hair and wrapped her in her short robe. They
heard the grunts and puffs of Ian waking up downstairs. Jaime brought him up with a dry diaper and handed him to Claire in her new slide rocking chair.

Ian was getting quite good at latching onto the thing he wanted most when hungry and Claire put her feet up on the ottoman and rocked them both, back and forth. She found this rocker so soothing and put her head back to enjoy the motion.

Jaime was stuck on the image in front of him. His son suckling his mother while holding her hair in his little fist. Claire with her robe open and legs up pushing back and forth. When she patted his back the burp came quickly and he latched onto the other side while Jaime stared at them.

Claire felt Ian’s movements stop and knew he was asleep. She stood up and laid him in the cradle giving it a push to start the rocking. She turned toward the bed and was surprised to see Jaime’s eyes open and focused on her. She smiled at the love of her life and slipped the robe off before climbing into bed. She pushed into Jaime and he held her close as they each fell into their dreams.

Deep in the night, Claire felt a bristly beard against her inner thighs and a tongue slip into her fold making her gasp and hold his head to her. He pulled her hips under his lips and took command of her body, wanting more, taking more, and promising her everything without speaking. Claire’s shattering orgasm was Jaime’s cue to ravish her. He did so with the softest hands, a heart full of love, and a powerful need.

Downstairs on the kitchen counter, Claire’s phone vibrated with a message. In Boston, a woman sat in her car cursing the phone before punching in the numbers again. A Boston police sergeant hollered at one of his team to find this Beauchamp woman and then mentions it’s a bit strange the way she disappeared almost two years ago. A Boston private investigator listens to a woman’s voice describe the person of interest and says she will send a courier the next day with a partial fee. The investigator agrees to take a job, find Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp.

Claire opened her eyes to the sound of her son winding up to cry in earnest. She smiled to herself. Even in the middle of the night, she got so excited to see him again. She pulled Ian close to her and cooed at him in the dark. She felt the pull and the milk start to flow as she rocked them both. She looked at Jaime, asleep on his back with one hand on his chest and smiled at the memory of their sexual reunion. All was well with the world tonight she thought and sighed with her contentment.
Chapter 47

The man sat in the holding cell and gritted his teeth against the rage that threatened to tear every man there apart. He counted and gripped the chair he sat on until his fingers bled. He started counting backward from one thousand because it would take more concentration. He had to get out of here before every enemy, college rival, every female he ever dated came forward to testify against him. This lower class of people who lived on envy and despised people of means. He didn’t like surprises so he had to get out of this jail and make a list of people to see. He knew the top two names already, Claire and Gwen.

Every television in Boston covered the gory murder of Dr. Louis Fenton Randall who was beaten to death and dumped outside of the city in the woods. Her body was discovered by a hiker and his dog. The dog handled the discovery like a champ. The hiker…didn’t.

Boston was no stranger to murder, but when the victim was a prominent surgeon with no known ties to the criminal layer of society the police would always look at husband, boyfriend, close family, extended family, and so on. Louise’s mother provided compelling first-hand testimony of the husband’s rage, and the tire tracks leading up to the body matched those of her husband’s car. Boston police executed a search warrant of the woman’s home including the husband's car and found enough evidence to indict Frank Randall for first-degree murder. That was two weeks ago and he finally faced the judge yesterday when bail was set at half a million dollars. His lawyer had fought for a reduction in bail. The judge, a fifty-year-old black woman, looked at the reports in front of her and amended the bail to one million dollars. She leveled a stare at the lawyer and raised her eyebrows. Frank’s family posted his bail and his sister went to work on finding the top two people on his list.

Claire felt a delicious surge of energy as she bounded downstairs after making love to Jaime again this morning. It seemed like they were enjoying intimacy for the first time again, exploring and testing. It was delirious fun and he would need lots of calories this morning. She pulled out eggs, orange juice, ham, and sausage and turned up the burners on the stove. She sang to Ian in his bouncy chair and kissed his cheek when quite suddenly…he smiled at her.

“Oh, my God! You precious little boy,” she cooed. “You smiled at me!” Then he did it again. Jaime heard the commotion and descended the winding stairs three at a time.

“What have ye done laddie to make your mam smile so?” Jaime kissed Ian's fat cheeks smiling and Ian blew bubbles and looked at his hand. Jaime caught his wife by the waist and pressed his lips to hers. He felt her body melt into his and shook his head. “Sassenach, ye have a way of making me feel I’m the most important person in yer life. If I kept kissin ye would ye let the eggs burn on the fire?”

Claire smiled at him, “of course not.”

Jaime looked deep into her eyes and smiled, “well, they’re burnin lass.” He kissed her deeply and smiled because she made no move to save the eggs. Jaime reached around Claire and turned the burners off. The way she was looking at him was all the nutrition he needed. ‘Can ye turn that into lunch mo chridhe. I have a pony club meetin five minutes ago.”

Claire straightened her back feeling guilty and pushed him out the door. She smiled at her darling son and picked up her buzzing phone. She looked at the caller and sucked air like she had been stabbed. “Jesus Christ! Gwen. By our agreement, this is something awful. What’s happened?” As Gwen explained Frank’s arrest for murder and making bail Claire gripped the counter fearing she would
tumble in the spinning room. “Jesus Gwen. Did he do it?”

Claire could hear the terror in Gwen’s voice. “Of course he did it. They had enough evidence to arrest him for murder in the first. I haven’t answered my phone since he made bail yesterday. His sister has left so many messages she filled my voice mail. She wants to meet with me and asked where you were. I can only assume the police will want us to testify about Frank’s temper and…all the rest.”

Claire was so completely unprepared for this news she struggled to compose herself and think about the peril they were both in. Gwen, you have been his assistant for ten years. No one knows him better than you do. You need to get out of Boston. Go somewhere he doesn’t know. Do you have family out of town..like in another country?”

“My sister lives in Florida and I can go there. I haven’t left my car since yesterday afternoon. I don’t want to go back to my apartment to pack anything because I’m terrified. His sister sounds more cold-blooded that he is.”

“You can call for a police back up, although they will probably force you to make a statement if you ask for help. Have you decided who’s side you’re on yet Gwen.” Claire grimaced at the harsh sound of her words.

“I am happy to give a statement. I intend to tell them everything. Claire, do you know anything about confidential information. What can I refuse to tell them about you and where you are?”

“I am a registered surgeon in Arizona now Gwen. I won’t be hard to find.” You don’t know my address and I won’t tell you so don’t worry about me. Just speak your truth and get the fuck out of Boston.” Claire could hear Gwen crying and it broke her heart.

“Can I check in with you once I’m in Florida?”

“No Gwen. We won’t speak again. Be safe honey and thank you so much for the warning.” Claire clicked off with cold-blooded certainty. She removed the battery from her phone grabbed Ian’s sling and walked to the barn.

Everyone had been up to the house on solo visits but today she waded into a pool of her friends smiling like she had not a care in the world. When she saw Jaime she pulled away and walked quickly toward him.

Jaime knew his wife well enough to back up into the office as she walked toward him. He closed the door when she sat down. He didn’t speak but he was ready when Claire spoke. “Keep goin Sassenach, tell me everything. Jaime made some notes and presented Claire with the face of a calm man while his brain cried for war and the protection of his treasure, the Sassenach. While she talked his mind struggled with the reality that Claire had been a target since he met her. She was as scared now as she was when Laoghaire threatened her. How could this be? She already had a double dose of homicidal crazy and now Frank would come after her. He would have given a kidney for it to be man to man, just him and Frank, but two lions don’t battle in the human world. One seeks the prey the other wants to protect. He felt his arms burning because he couldn’t relax his muscles. Time to get to a cooler place and seek cooler heads to help sort this out.

Jaime walked around his desk and sank to his knees. He held her hands and promised her she and Ian would be protected. Jaime called Lance and they were soon pointed in the direction of the gym. Lance and Vinnie were waiting for them and they sat in Lance’s cool office explaining the problem.

Lance looked at Vinnie, “get the phone out of here.”
Vinnie held his hand out to Claire and then to Jaime. When the phones were given he left the office.

“Even when it’s turned off they can still use the phone to track you and even listen or take pictures. Caution never hurt anyone” he said smiling. It’s better not to have anything registered to Claire. Pick up a burner phone at Walmart until the dude is behind bars.

Jaime looked at Lance. “Is yer brother comin?”

Lance looked out at the parking lot. “Any minute.”

Jaime put his arm around Claire and held her tightly.

“Deep breath buddy” Lance was saying.

Jaime jerked his head toward his friend and realized his emotions were playing across his face like a movie.

The door opened and a man walked in looking like he had been sleeping under a bridge. He smiled at Lance and they shook hands in a way Claire had never seen. Jaime wondered how this man could just walk into a meeting without even knocking. He reeked of body odor. The man sat down and looked at Jaime and Claire.

“I can’t hang around long sorry to say so let’s get right to it. Oh, I’m square, Lance’s brother.” They filled him in and explained the phones were with Vinnie. Square asked questions, heard the answers and delivered the bad news.

“The internet, registration of your medical license, your horse, your vehicle, the ads you ran for the horse thing, hospital affiliation, your home lease, are all public information. They already know where you are, now it’s a matter of a flight across the country. The dude is facing prison for life so he is motivated to guarantee your silence Claire. One way or the other. I’m sorry but you should expect him tonight.”

Claire put her hand on Ian’s head and recoiled at what the man was saying. “Jaime, is that how you feel too?”

Jaime looked at her pale face and she could see the truth in his eyes.

“Dear God, does that mean everyone I know here is in danger?”

Square brightened a bit. “I am banking on Frank’s impulsiveness and his particular mental illness.” There’s a slight chance his arrogant mind won’t consider your married. Even though your son’s birth record is public, he is registered as Ian Fraser. Your marriage license was done in Scotland so that might take time to figure out. Your medical license, have you updated it with your new name yet?”

Claire thought about the question like she had never considered updating her name. An oversight that would serve her for now. “No.”

Square looked at Jaime. “You can hold your own against a fancy doctor from Boston and it might be therapeutic. Put Claire and baby somewhere safe that only you know and wait for the fucker. I know some cops in this area I trust. They can be ready to arrest him on violation of a court order to stay in Boston and he’ll be extradited to wait in a cell until his trial. By what I’ve heard in thirty minutes the guy killed his wife, he feels entitled, thinks little of the life of others. If he didn’t like the taste of killing he might use other means to guarantee Claire’s silence. He spoke the last sentence quietly and looked at baby Ian. I’m sorry Claire.”
Claire was trying to squeeze behind Jaime and the couch. She was near hysterical and clutching Ian to her like his life depended on it. “J-Jaime, help us please!”

Jaime was near undone by Claire’s fright and he quickly shook square’s hand and thanked him. He told the man he had a trustworthy cop in his area that could be ready to arrest Frank. No need for more people involved. “I’m gettin Claire out of the area until this is over.”

Square asked his brother for his lunch and held his hand out until Lance cursed and threw the brown paper bag to him. Square took half the sandwich and the bag and threw the rest back at his brother. When he walked out of the gym he looked like a street person who just begged a sandwich off of someone in the gym and he melted into the living landscape.

“That was Brandon. He is deep undercover so we’re lucky he came. Sorry he didn’t have better news.”

Jaime gripped Lance’s hand and shook it. “I’m indebted to ye friend, thank ye.”

“Do you want help tonight?” Lance asked.

“No. I got this. But thank ye.” Jaime looked like he was in control but his insides were coming apart. As they left the gym Jaime knew he had to find a safe place for Claire and leave her alone so he could wait for Frank. By the looks of her, that would not go over well.

He pointed his truck toward home and started talking to his freaked out wife. “Do ye trust me Claire to see you and Ian through this?” He looked at her face so full of fear.

“Yes. What is your plan Jaime?”

“I’m sending the two of ye to Scotland. Ye’ll stay there until Frank is sentenced to life in prison for murder.” He was gripping the steering wheel like it might break in two.

Claire touched his face and he looked at her wishing this was all a bad dream and feeling the heartbreak of losing his family already.

Claire fed Ian while Jaime made phone calls to alert the officer that had helped them previously and then found a flight for Claire to Scotland. He walked outside to call Jenny in private. She answered his second call and sounded sleepy. “What’s happened brother?”

When he heard Jenny’s voice he lost it. Jenny’s heart broke hearing her brother so undone by something terrible. She clutched her heart while she waited fearing it was the baby. When Jaime could talk he explained the situation and of course Jenny and Ian were ready to take his wife and son and protect them. “Tell her I can’t wait to see her and my nephew,” Jenny spoke through her own tears and promised they would care for them both until he came for them.

Jaime booked their flight and felt like the world was coming to an end. He felt so weak and so drained from worry. He wondered what he would do to Frank if he did show up. He knew he should get to the barn and talk to Rupert and Angus. As critical as that was he only wanted to hold Claire in their bed and just be quiet with her. He walked out of his study and heard Sarah’s voice talking to Claire. She was giving commands as only she could. He smiled with relief, they had the best of help right now.

Jaime could not help himself from picking Ian up from his crib. He was sound asleep with a tummy full of milk and cuddled into Jaime’s meaty arms to continue chasing his dreams. Jaime sat in the rocking chair and stared at his son, feeling the loneliness without him already.
Claire walked out of the nursery and looked at Jaime and Ian. Her heart was breaking and her tears fell freely. She had been in survival mode since the meeting but now she took stock in Jaime’s loss and danger. She felt herself shaking and feared she would break in two with the need to protect both her husband and her son. She was just now considering a stay in Scotland without him and she felt scared and lonely for him. Sarah rubbed her arms and pulled her back to the packing. Sarah knew her friend needed to cry but this was not the time. She prayed this would be over soon and this gut-wrenching separation would end.

Ian slept in his father’s arms and Jaime prayed to his da. They are leavin me da to be safe on our farm. I pray I have the strength not to fall on my knees and beg her to stay. Help me da, to send them away, and be strong and fit for the task at hand. Jaime looked down and saw Ian staring up at him. He didn’t make a sound, nor did he wiggle and grunt. He just looked at Jaime, like he knew the sacrifice his father was making and he approved. Then his little eyes closed and he was asleep again.

Jaime was still reeling from the intimate moment with his son when he felt Claire’s cool hand on the back of his neck. He looked up at the front door closing behind Sarah and then looked up at Claire. She moved her head toward the stairs. Jaime covered Ian in the cradle and laid down next to Claire. He held his wife closely and buried his head in her neck praying for their safety in Gaelic. They had an hour and they just held each other and said what needed to be said.

When Jaime handed Ian to Claire he kissed her deeply and pushed his forehead to hers until the last call to board. Claire walked out of his sight and Jaime felt his heart break in two. He could not find the energy or will to turn around and leave the airport until he heard his father’s voice telling him to move his feet. There was something to be done about this threat and he was not ready to face it yet. It was time for him to move.

Back at the barn, Jaime sat at his desk and looked at Rupert, Angus, Shawn and Ruby. His friends were ready to play their part in leading Frank right to Jaime. Like it was choreographed, the three friends knew they could each be depended on the others to complete the mission.

Jaime called Sarah and suggested she and Ruby stay in the guest room until this was over. Sarah agreed and gave her ‘over and out’ before clicking off. Even if Frank flew all afternoon to get there Jaime did not expect him at the barn tonight. He locked up and went home.

Claire’s flight was eleven hours long and she would land in Edinburgh at eight the following morning, mid-afternoon in Scotland. Jaime wandered around his house reaching for his ridiculous burner phone and realizing his sister was still asleep. Finally, at eleven o’clock that night he let it ring through. Jenny’s voice was like a balm to a bee sting. He closed his eyes and listened to her voice. Jenny learned more details of the threat and shuddered against the reality of Claire’s torture with that man. She promised to call as they were heading for the airport.

Jaime laid in bed and was relieved to feel sleep waiting to grab him. C’mon Frank, he thought, come and get her. This time around she has a big, pissed off Scot to protect her, that would be me, and I will make you pay for every one of your crimes against Claire and the rest of humanity. C’mon Frank. It won’t hurt much after the first ten minutes because your mind will shut down, followed by your kidneys, liver, and a bit later, your heart. Somewhere in his ghoulish thoughts, he slipped away into a dreamless sleep.

Claire reclined after Ian was fed and asleep. She looked out the window at the night sky full of stars. She could not stop the tears from covering her cheeks because every minute on this plane sent her further from Jaime. She felt a light tap on her shoulder and looked up at a smiling flight attendant.

“Your eyes haven’t been dry since we departed Phoenix. I read that moderate alcohol consumption will not hurt the baby if its two hours before the next feeding. She placed a glass of whiskey on
Claire’s table. With our compliments. If you don’t like whiskey I’m afraid you’re heading to the wrong country. She smiled at Claire. Get some rest if you can.”

Claire watched the attendant walk briskly away and reached for the whiskey.

Shawn and Ruby pulled the tack off their horses and chatted about the western gaits and the pleasure to ride horses of this quality. Shawn ran through his mind looking for things to talk about so she wouldn’t bolt out of the barn like she usually does. He took the saddle from her and said he would meet her at the wash rack. He watched Ruby walk out of the arena leading a sweaty horse.

He was almost sure she liked him but she showed no overt signs of it even after two months of riding together several times per week. Tonight was the night to ask her out to dinner, someplace nice. Please say yes Ruby, he thought, I never figured on the likes of you in America and I canna push it back, I’ve tried.

Shawn found Ruby bent at the waist running hose water through her hair while the horse looked confused. She whipped her hair back and let it drip down her back. Her face was red from the heat and Shawn felt like he was intruding and turned around to speak to the horse. Ruby was not affected by his presence in the least. She untied her horse and walked it back to its stall. When she came back she said goodnight to Shawn and walked briskly toward the big door to the outside. Like it was an afterthought, she called over her shoulder for Shawn to come for a swim before he passed out from the heat.

“Ruby!” He caught her halfway down the driveway and grabbed her hand. “Where would ye be goin then?”

Ruby pointed in the direction of the house and suggested he use a flashlight to find the house, like the one she had. She gave him a rare smile and continued to walk home. She checked for calls from Sarah and hoped she was fast asleep in Claire’s guest bedroom believing Ruby was sacked out on the couch. They were free to enjoy a swim while Ruby did her level best to become Shawn’s girlfriend.

Shawn almost turned around believing he went the wrong way when he heard splashing water. He just followed the sound, found the driveway, the house, the back yard, and Ruby standing at an outdoor table drinking a bottle of water… in the smallest bikini he had ever seen on a woman. When she turned around his eyes almost popped out seeing the flat plane of her stomach, and all points north and south.

Ruby laughed, “I forgive you for staring at me. You probably thought my skin was made of denim. So get those jeans off and jump in!”

Shawn barely got them off before he fell into the water.

Ruby waited but he didn’t pop up. She wondered if she just killed her almost boyfriend because he couldn’t swim. She peered over the side searching for him and felt her feet leave the cool deck when he pulled her in. Ruby popped up laughing at the surprise. She let Shawn take her breath away with his long hair slicked back and bright white teeth smiling through a rugged tan face.

Shawn saw her interest and wanted to let out a whoop but held it in. “Ruby, lookin at me that way will get ye in trouble. I suggest ye stop.” He watched her gaze drop to his six pack abs and linger before coming back up to his face. “I warned ye lass,” he said closing the distance. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to within an inch of his body. She was tall, just two or three inches shorter than he was. Their lips were just inches apart. “Can I kiss ye Ruby?” When she shook her head. Shawn pressed into her lips and coaxed her to kiss him back. “Have ye never been kissed before lass?”
“No, but the rate I learn is startling. So teach me.”

Shawn was bowled over by her honesty and readiness. Through his laughter, he told her she was the weirdest and most wonderful girl he ever met. Ruby looked at his lips and said she was ready.

Shawn was happy to have an excuse to kiss and touch her and vowed tonight was neck up only. He guided Ruby against the side of the pool and demonstrated the levels of kissing. When he moved out of the friend zone the lesson became very interesting to Ruby and she did indeed learn fast.

Shawn gripped her arms panting. “Uncle… Ruby…Uncle!” He dove under the water and thought his lungs might explode before he came up for air. He shot out of the pool and reached for his towel. Ruby was right behind him stammering. The first true sign of her insecurity.

“What happened? Did I bite you by accident? You don’t like the way I kiss?” Her face was a study in anxiety.

Shawn dropped into a chair and looked up at her innocence. Then at her toned legs and perky breasts and he put his head in his hands and sighed. “Ruby, I love ye.” When she didn’t respond he looked up but Ruby was gone. He looked at the pool, no Ruby. He felt his heart drop, “you idiot” he whispered.

Like a blur he watched Ruby run out of the house holding paper or something. Shawn blushed hard feeling like the idiot he was.

Ruby jumped into the seat next to him and handed him a sketch pad. “Look at my hobby Shawn.” She would remember his face for the rest of her life. He was overwhelmed at the pictures of his face, page after page. Every expression and pose, his eyes and mouth in drawn by themselves at least thirty times. He laughed at what he looked like in the morning because she captured sleepy eyes and stubble chin perfectly.

When he finally looked up she pointed to a stack of sketchbooks in various sizes and pulled the pages up letting them fall one by one. They were all full, of pictures of him. His smile got bigger as it started to sink in. Ruby loved him too. He pulled her up and crushed her to him and she felt the kiss from her head to her toes.

Ruby felt sensations that were overpowering, intense, and wonderful. She heard her phone buzzing and broke the kiss. “Jaime?”

“Where are ye lass? Are ye hurt?” He sounded frantic.

“No, I’m swimming with Shawn… Hello?”

“Ye were supposed to stay away from that house tonight, remember? It’s dangerous Ruby.”

“No problem, sorry to worry you. I’ll stay with Shawn tonight. See ya tomorrow.”

“Wait!” Jaime stared at his phone with wide eyes and open mouth. “Oh my God, Claire is gonna kill me.” He paced in his room and walked outside but there was nothing to see or do out there. He ran a hand through his hair and knocked on Sarah’s door.

It took Sarah five seconds to open the door. Her reading glasses hung from her neck and there were piles of files on her bed, one was open. “What?” She looked at him like it was common to visit at one o’clock in the morning. “Jaime?”

“I, Ruby, well she is, he is takin her to, Ruby said like it was nothin and I think its somethin…bad gonna happen to Ruby if ye dinna go and get her. Aye?”
Sarah looked at Jaime blush crimson and roll his eyes in the general direction of the barn.

“Where is she?” Sarah asked with raised eyebrows.

He looked around the room like there might be an audience behind him, “Shawn’s trailer…”

Sarah smiled big. “Ah, finally.” She turned and started to close her door and go back to work.

Jaime stood stock still looking at the closed door three inches from his face. He shook his head wondering if he was dreaming. Ruby is being ravished by Shawn in his trailer and Sarah is excited about it. Claire was his interpreter for such things and he felt her absence like a blind man losing his dog.

Shawn held the door to his trailer for Ruby. She grabbed jeans and a shirt but only pulled a white t-shirt over her suit for the walk to his place. He looked at her every time her back was turned. The t-shirt was tight around her hips at the bottom and showed an inch of flat stomach and tiny black bikini bottoms. He thought her long legs were her most striking feature, right after her stomach, butt, and shoulders. He grabbed her to him with her back against his chest and pointed her at the mirror hanging on his door.

"I need help with yer body lassie." He made her look in the mirror and peered around her shoulder making faces at her. “I canna decide what yer best feature is, and I need yer help.” He held her close and pouted over her shoulder making her laugh. Ruby looked at her body and could not see a single outstanding feature. She felt weird and tried to get away.

“Ah, ye beautiful lasses are too used to yer perfection. No time to bother with a sufferin laddie. Yer all the same.” He pouted harder and watched Ruby’s face go from insecurity to confusion.

“Look my lass. Only one body part can be the ten.” He wrapped his hands around her tiny waist and his fingertips were touching. "Is it yer darlin waist then? " He slid his hands down her hips and grabbed her protruding hip bones. “It’s yer flawless hips then?” Each part he touched Ruby stammered about how she was not beautiful like that, trying to get him to stop.

Shawn dropped his chin on her shoulder and ran his hands up her thighs. Ruby was breathing harder he noticed. "Ah, my sweet lass is hidin something. He pressed himself against her back and she felt the length of him in the crack of her ass. She gulped air and watched his hands. His fingers slipped under her bikini top and boldly pushed up into the swell of her breasts. She wanted him to do something but she didn’t know what.

“What’s amiss lass? Can I have a kiss? You must turn yer head for me.”

Ruby turned her head hungry for a deep kiss. When Shawn invaded her mouth and held her tightly he pinched her nipple and had to catch Ruby as her knees buckled. He picked her up and laid her on
his bed. He slid up next to her and held her head as he took her higher.

“Ruby love, I struggle to keep myself from takin yer body completely. Lass, have a heart and let me come off this erotic perch.”

Her hands were everywhere they shouldn’t be and Shawn did his best to hold her at bay. “Ruby look at me”. She raised her eyes to his and felt him relax. “Not tonight lass. I need ye on the same page as me before we take this further. Aye?”

Ruby stared into Shawn’s blue eyes and nodded. He relaxed, “that’s a good lass. I love ye Ruby.” Shawn tried to wrap his arms around her when he was suddenly seized by her warm soft hand. “God lass, yer tryin to kill me.” He panicked when her hand pushed inside his swimming trunks and wrapped around him. He gripped her hand and moved it up and down until she got it.

“Ruby, please don’t tease me like that. His hand slipped into her bikini bottom and lightly touched her fold. Ruby gasped. Shawn pressed into her throbbing and Ruby arched her back as she spread her legs.

Shawn knew she was close and wanted more than heaven and earth to make her come. He vibrated his finger against her and Ruby went wild. Shawn’s erection was screaming at him to pound something. He pushed Ruby down against the mattress and looked into her eyes. Ye may not know about love yet lass so trust me and let yer body go. He looked at her nodding and lowered himself to that teasing black bikini, He wanted nothing more than to rip it off of her but forced himself to go slow pushing his tongue under the fabric, exploring her skin and pubic hair until he touched her clit with his wet tongue and suddenly wanted to devour her.

Ruby thrashed in his bed, arching her back as he teased and sucked at her innocence. When he felt her go rigid and quiet he knew she was falling headlong into her first organic orgasm. He pushed her along mercifully and felt her energy come into him. He licked his lips and pulled himself between her open legs. His cock was right against her but he was prepared to roll away from her if she wanted that.

He pushed up on his elbows and pulled her hair into his fists holding her head for him to devour. “I want yer pussy sweet Ruby…give it to me.” He pressed into her and watched her face. He pushed his finger into her. “Here Ruby, this is what I want. Yer so wet and swollen I know ye want me too. I’m gonna push into ye with somethin much bigger than my finger. He felt her raise her hips and pushed deeper into her. “Once it starts, it will hurt ye a bit and I may not be able to stop. I want to fuck ye lass, hard, deep and no restraint.” He pushed himself into her slightly.

Ruby was over the top in sensation overload. She kept begging Shawn to do it and pressed her legs open. When he entered her she abruptly stopped at the intrusion. Shawn looked down at her face willing himself to hold back. He placed her hand on his buttock and waited. His heart was ramming and he allowed himself to move into her another half inch. He waited and felt her body adjust to him. He touched her bud softly before he pulled out and dropped his face to her throbbing. He licked so softly and she moaned and arched her back. He slipped two fingers into her and pressed his palm against her clit so every thrust of his fingers was met with Ruby’s thrusting hips. She was calling out for him and suddenly he stopped.

In the dead quiet of the night, he dropped his head and ran the flat of his tongue from her ass to her clit and Ruby screamed. She arched her back and Shawn slipped into her driving himself to her cervix. He held her hips tightly and kissed her deeply. Wide sweeps of his tongue into her mouth made her moan.

“Do ye want me Ruby?” He pulled out halfway and she pushed on his buttocks until he slid back
into her. “I love ye Ruby.” She opened her eyes and locked with his.

“That can’t be all there is to it.” She gave the dead man’s stare and acted bored. Shawn stared at her in disbelief. Ruby raised her head and pushed her tongue into his mouth. “What happens when you take that bit out of your gorgeous mouth?”

Shawn grabbed her hips and growled into her. “Lift yer legs lass.” He pounded into her and felt her muscles quiver around him before gripping him like a firm hand. “God Ruby!” He was a runaway train and exploded into her with such force he almost passed out.

“Jesus, Ruby! Are ye alright lass?” He looked down at Ruby’s closed eyes and felt incredible shame and fear. “Please Ruby, I just lost control. I’m sorry.”

Ruby peaked at him and he saw the corners of her lips curl up. “Would that be because I drive you mad with desire?”

Shawn dropped his head to her shoulder, clearly ready to slit his own throat. He felt her nuzzle against his cheek. “I want more of that please.” He felt her wiggle under him.

Shawn’s head came up and he looked at this amazing girl and saw the passion in her eyes. He held her head and kissed her face a dozen times. “Tell me you love me Ruby.”

“I love you Shawn. Tremendously.”

“More than Pup?”

“Yes.”

Shawn pulled Ruby into him and spooned her. “This is the second best thing about love.”

“I like this very much.” Ruby yawned deeply. “I want to be your girlfriend.”


“That works too.”

Shawn could tell Ruby was asleep within minutes. “Oh my God,” he whispered.
Chapter 48

The investigator hired by Frank’s sister had uncovered a plethora of information at first, all of it was completely wrong. He reported on the GPS location of Claire’s phone and confirmed she was working at the Scottsdale hospital and lived at 1350 Sweetwater in Phoenix. Compliments of Vinnie who had attached the phone to the undercarriage of a high-end car in the doctor’s parking area of the hospital. It would ping locations consistent with a physician even when the battery died. Frank wasted several days scouring the location before giving up in disgust. The investigator amended his report with Claire’s address off Ironwood Drive and found her internet ads for an equine therapy manager at Fraser Equestrian Center. Frank found a side road into the mountain range where he could watch both the house and barn. He was at the end of his rope. He had never felt heat like this before or the limitless misery that came with it. One way or another he was going to confront Claire today and then get back to Boston.

Four days passed without any sign of Frank and Jaime’s loneliness for Claire grew. He was out of sorts most of the time eating fast food every night followed by hours of insomnia. The team was ready for him. Everyone knew the signals and where to guide Frank once he wandered in. Rupert installed a key-only deadbolt on Jaime’s office door, the key remained inserted in the lock on the outside of the door. A room dividing screen was brought in to hide a portion of the office and the trap was set. The tension was palpable as the hours and days passed.

Frank walked into the barn and looked around for someone to ask about Claire. He looked into the supply room and asked Rupert if Claire Beauchamp was around. Rupert stood up and smiled good-naturedly. “Ah, yes she is here somewhere.” He leaned out the door and called for Claire a few times. Jaime heard the call for Claire and dashed behind the screen. Rupert walked Frank to the office and told him to have a seat in the air conditioning while he went to find her. Frank walked into the office and heard the door slam and the deadbolt thrown from the outside. He tried the door and realized he was locked in. “Fuck!” Frank’s heart rate shot up and he struggled to compose himself.

The office was small and half hidden with a room divider. He heard boots on the wood floor behind the screen. “Hello, I’m looking for Dr. Claire Beauchamp, I was told she was here. Hello?” Frank felt his guts churning acid and his mind snapped. “Who the fuck is here and why am I locked in this room?”

Jaime walked around the divider and calmly looked at Frank. For a long minute, Jaime watched his panic rise, and his eyes betray fear. All of the fight or flight symptoms came to the surface. Jaime remained quiet, wanting and waiting for Frank to get angry, hoping Frank would get angry.

Frank stared at Jaime in disbelief. Who was this freak he wondered and what did he know about Claire? He was obviously misdirected and now had to deal with this ignorant farm worker. “I am looking for Claire Beauchamp. She is obviously not here so kindly let me out.”

Jaime watched him, wanting to fill his eyes and brain with the image of Frank. The way a five foot, seven inch, one hundred and ten-pound innocent girl would see him. He sat on his desk not two feet from Frank and just watched him. C’mon ye coward, get angry, really angry. Frank was not experiencing enough discomfort to lose control. Jaime would have to help him.

“Frank, I know all about what ye did to Claire. What ye took from her, what ye left in her brain when she finally ran away from ye. I’m her husband, ye ken.”

Frank had not considered that Claire would surround herself with people that would threaten him or
even impede his mission to silence her. He underestimated her and now faced his own peril because
of his impulsiveness. Frank stared at Jaime with hatred.

Jaime’s eyebrows lifted with the slightest smile. There it was, the first sign of the true Frank. Let’s
pull him out the rest of the way and take a look at this psychopath, he thought. “Frank… I am gonna
hurt ye. Not kill ye, because Claire deserves a husband to help raise our son. I will start with yer
hands, and cripple them so ye canna hope to hold a scalpel again or fight the bullies who want to
torture and fuck ye in prison. Yer hands will be mangled and useless.”

Frank stared at the Scot like he had lost his mind. His eyes were darting around the room looking for
an escape.

Jaime watched him from behind his mask of composure. “I’ll take an eye I think, and hope to cripple
yer gate so ye walk in pain for the rest of yer life. Any kidney death or ruptured spleen will be purely
accidental just so ye know.”

Frank squared off and Jaime smiled.

“I am a fair man Frank. I’m bigger than you, stronger, ye know I could rip yer throat out if I wanted
and we would be done here. Let’s even the playin field Frank which is more than ye did for yer wife.
I’ll give ye five minutes to hurt, maim, or maybe kill me. If you get so lucky ye can put a chair
through the window and call for help. Yer time starts now.”

Jaime dropped his head, hands shoved between his thighs, and waited. The first hit caught him in the
right temple. More powerful than he expected. He shook his head and waited. Two blows of a fist,
one on the right side of his face, one on the left. His hand came down on the desk to steady himself.
His ears were ringing and he felt dizzy. The next five or six blows were head, neck, and back, after
which Jaime would right himself again. Jaime looked up at the clock and Frank savagely landed his
fist in Jaime’s face then kicked the desk causing Jaime to topple over it.

Jaime struggled to stay conscious. It was almost over and Frank had just provided ample evidence of
his murderous temper and violence. Frank had one more minute. The next thing Jaime felt was a
chair crashing down on his head and he moved swiftly to the let the desk take most of the blow.

Frank was elated “you stupid ignorant fucker! You let your guard down and got beaten for it.
Locking me in here was a great idea, no one to stop me from killing you!” Frank struggled to breathe
after his assault but he was feeling invincible with a granite erection. He peered into the toppled desk
and upturned chair wanting to continue until the Scot was dead. He watched the debris for
movement. He saw the Scot’s eyes open and stare directly at him. “Times up.”

Frank screamed as the chair shot out from the floor and the desk was kicked back up like it never
topped. He twisted his body to put distance between them and felt the Scot grab his right hand.
Jaime laced his fingers into Franks and savagely jerked his arm down, breaking four fingers at once.
Frank screamed and tried to pull away but Jaime grabbed his thumb and bent it back until it touched
Frank’s arm bringing his knee down on Frank’s hand. The force separated his thumb and Jaime
heard the bones shatter and Frank scream. Jaime brought his elbow down on Frank’s right eye
shattering the eyeball then drove his head into the wall.

Frank collapsed on the floor and was unconscious. Jaime reached behind the divider and grabbed his
phone to call his officer and then Rupert. Frank had landed some successful punches to his face and
Jaime started feeling nauseous and dizzy. He heard the key twist and saw a fuzzy Rupert and Angus
reach for him before everything went to black.

Chaos erupted in the tiny office as two ambulances screamed up the driveway and EMT’s piled into
the cramped space. They ran the gurney that held Jaime back to the vehicle while one man spoke to a doctor at the hospital relaying assessment data.

When Jaime opened his eyes there were paramedics surrounding him. He blinked to clear his focus but it did not help, his eyes were full of blood. He had a cuff on his arm and an EMT was testing his pupil response. He tried to clear his head but he was too confused so he put his head back and closed his eyes. Behind his eyelids, a cool hand reached for him in the dark. She held him to her. “My love,” she said as she cradled his battered head. “Stay with me love,” she said, but he was spinning down a deep black hole, somewhere unknown. He was seized with fear. Not for his life but for hers. She refused to let him go and when he realized she had the strength to save him he stopped spinning and came to rest. He gripped her arms and held on looking up into the face he loved. “Sassenach.”

Jaime went silent, deep into a coma. His existence was no more than blackness and Claire’s hands holding his head. She wouldn’t let go of him, so he rested.

Claire felt the vibration of her phone in her pocket and exhaled in relief. Jaime had not called in tonight as usual and her worry was getting hard to ignore. When she heard the voice of Angus calling from Jaime’s burner phone she struggled to breathe and held the phone with shaking hands. She heard about Jaime taunting Frank into a fight. Angus talked for what seemed like hours as her tears rolled down her cheeks. He kept talking and she sobbed no longer hearing him. Ian took the phone from her and when Angus was through, Ian hung up. Jenny was sitting with Claire who was completely undone.

Ian looked down at the women knowing Jenny would be losing it soon as well. “Jenny, go pack for a week and hurry lass. You and Claire have to get on a plane tonight.” It was almost impossible for Ian to watch Claire dissolve into her heartbreak. Jenny ran upstairs feeling terrified and threw her clothes into a suitcase and grabbed her rosary. Claire needed her help but so did Jaime. She sat in her chair and prayed while her own tears dropped into her lap.

Dougal stood at the foot of Jaime’s hospital bed and watched him with a face of stone. It couldn’t end this way his mind raged. Jaime was larger than life, stronger than Hercules, how could he succumb to a fist fight? When Shawn called him, Dougal used his influence to gain access to Jaime’s room and found him alone. Hospital policy kept his friends in the waiting room when he needed them at his bedside pulling him back. He made a phone call and special consideration was underway.

Jaime laid lifeless like he was already dead and Dougal couldn’t stand it. He walked to the side of the bed, “lad, ye look like yer takin a beauty nap. Ye have to fight to stay in this world and I canna see ye fightin! Jaime my boy, its time to come back. Yer wife and son are tryin to get back. Wake up so ye don’t scare yer son half to death!”

Dougal looked at Jaime’s face, he was hardly recognizable with the swelling and he showed no sign of consciousness. Dougal was heartbroken. “Jaime yer da wants me to speak for him. Dougal recited the Gaelic prayer a father’s love three times while he held Jaime’s unmoving hand. He hadn’t known Jaime’s father but somehow he knew he should speak for him. He was overcome with emotion and left Jaime’s room.

Hospital policy was family members only into intensive care. The team stayed in the waiting area since Jaime was brought in. They waited through his surgery to relieve the swelling in his brain. They waited while he was in recovery and now they waited for him to wake up. Rupert, Angus, Ruby, and Sarah had been sitting in plastic chairs for eighteen hours. Not allowed to see Jaime and couldn’t bring themselves to leave.

There would be no luck for the women getting back to Arizona. The Edinburgh airport was closed due to a haar that had come in off the water. A thick fog that hovered over the city bringing
transportation to a grinding halt. Ian called the airport all night hoping to book their flight but by morning he was still unsuccessful. When the haar finally dissipated the airport did their level best to dig out from a nine-hour closure.

The hours of waiting allowed cold fingers of doom to creep into Claire’s mind and around her heart. Her exhaustion chipped away at her sanity until she felt close to a nervous breakdown. She struggled to stay positive and called the hospital hourly for an update on Jaime’s condition only to hang up with a new level of despair.

Claire put a fussy Ian to her breast and after two minutes he cried as she had never heard him before. No milk flowed. She looked at her son and felt her empty breast feeling utterly out of control. Jenny came out of the kitchen with a bottle of Similac and took Ian to her lap to feed him.

Claire sat perfectly still, like a statue. Her mind screamed to get home to Jaime but she was powerless and stuck so far away from him. She couldn’t bear sitting and waiting any longer, she walked out the kitchen door and ran for the fields collapsing on the ground sobbing so hard she almost choked. She had to get home and help Jaime wake up. “Please Jaime, wake up, I am coming with your son but you have to open your eyes.” Claire was vaguely aware of a breeze blowing through the leaves when she felt him there with her and held her breath. Sitting absolutely still she waited for something to happen while tears rolled down her face. The warmth on her cheek was unmistakable and she couldn’t breathe for fear it would vanish. The warmth became the pressure of a finger that moved along her jaw and touched her lips. “Jaime,” she whispered, “please don’t leave me.” She blinked hard through her tears and sniffled but she still heard him say, “I willna.”

Claire took a deep breath and knew she was close to some kind of mental break down. She conjured up some kind of otherworldly interaction with Jaime because she had to. She didn’t believe in such things but couldn’t stop herself from saying “I love you Jaime” out loud.

Jenny called her from the house. Claire knew by the sound of her voice that something had happened. She got to her feet and ran as fast as she could. Her legs were burning but she pushed on trying to guess by Jenny’s face what had happened. When she reached the door Jenny grabbed her hand and told her to get ready, they had a flight.

Jaime lay in the darkness still holding onto to Claire’s arms. He could not let go for fear of spinning away from her forever. “Sassenach?”

“I am here love, do not fear.” She touched his forehead with a cool hand and laid it on his closed eyelids. “Sleep love.”

In the waiting room of the intensive care unit, the team was quiet, sore, drained, and scared. The nurse came in and announced, “Jaime Fraser’s group, come with me.”

Sarah took a deep breath fearing they would be told Jaime had passed away. She wasn’t a woman who cried about much but she couldn’t help herself now and the tears came gushing. Ruby stumbled to her and wrapped her arms around Sarah. She couldn’t speak but held onto her.

The group was led to another family waiting area with soft couches and cushions on the seats. There was a coffee machine and small boxes of cookies to snack on. The lighting was softer, from lamps on end tables mostly. It was calming after the jarring lights of the ER waiting room.

Ruby put her head in Sarah’s lap and her eyes stared straight ahead. “My father is holding a candlelight service for Jaime right now. The whole congregation is there I’m sure. For the next hour, they will pray for Jaime.”
Ruby looked down at Sarah, “what?”

“My father is a Southern Baptist minister and his church in Palm Desert is having a service for Jaime.”

“I’m very glad to hear that Ruby,” Sarah said as the blanks in Ruby’s story began to fill in. “Ruby, it looks like someone is looking for you.”

Ruby launched off Sarah’s lap and ran to embrace Shawn. He dropped his head and spoke quietly to her and they walked away from the others.

Rupert’s phone rang and he spoke quietly for a few minutes and then hung up. He looked at Sarah and Angus, “Claire, the baby, and Jaime’s sister have been in the air for five hours. They took what they could get, two stops, ten hours before she lands.”

Sarah’s heart sank as she exhaled. She worried that Jaime wouldn’t hang on that long. She stumbled to the hospital church and lit three candles before crossing herself and kneeling to pray. She had not spoken to God in prayer since leaving Iraq and her nun’s habit behind. Her faith so badly shaken by the loss of life and the brutality of war. There was no God in Iraq. There were no angels to save babies left in the street while parents fled. No God to stop the soldiers from strapping explosives on a five-year-old and sending them across to the enemy. No God to stop the torture of innocents when soldiers lost their minds. She did not feel repentant, or attritional. She knelt before a concept, a dream she lived in once that ultimately broke her heart.

Sarah bowed her head and felt the constricting collar of her nun’s habit and the heavy fabric of her wimple and veil. So long worn she felt them as phantom pressure when she bowed her head in prayer. I feel no sadness or yank on my heart, she prayed. That hurts as much as the years of loneliness without you. I served you tirelessly for twenty years and never asked for anything. I’m asking now blessed Lord, don’t take Jaime Fraser from this earth. Not yet. She continued to pray for Jaime and felt her body release years of anger and remorse as a calm came over her. She remained on her knees for another two hours and prayed for those who loved Jaime.

A nurse came into the waiting room and explained they could go into Jaime’s room one at a time for ten minutes each. She looked at Rupert, “would you like to see him now?” Rupert followed her.

One by one the team spent ten minutes with Jaime. Rupert told him about his mam and how much he missed her. Angus told Jaime they should cut back to four greenies again and increase profits through training and keeping them longer. Both men were conversational at first, showing Jaime they believed he would be back at work soon. Both men broke down at his bedside speaking their truth to their oldest friend.

Ruby almost fainted when she walked into Jaime’s room. His face was huge from the swelling and he barely resembled the man she knew. She held his hand tightly and prayed for her ten minutes resisting the nurse who pulled her gently back to the waiting room. Shawn looked at the heartbreak in Ruby’s face and felt completely powerless to help her. His ten minutes with Jaime was a heartfelt thank you for everything he had done for him. In truth, Shawn had single-handedly kept the barns running, the horses fed and turned out, he even washed the blood off the floor and walls of Jaime’s office.

The nurse sat among the team and told them to go home and rest. “Take a shower, eat, and rest for a few hours. You won’t do him any good sitting here and I promise to call each of you if there is any change. Rupert’s head shot up like she was daft. “Of course there will be a change, as soon as he wakes up.”
Shawn implored Ruby to come with him because he needed help and Pup was going to get sick without human interaction. In his heart, he just wanted to get Ruby out of the hospital so he could distract her from this misery. The comment about Pup did it and Ruby was pulling Shawn to his truck asking him to hurry.

Angus and Rupert said they would wait for Sarah and the nurse cleared her throat awkwardly. “Sarah is considered a member of the clergy according to hospital policy and she is sitting with Jaime until his wife and sister arrive. Both men stared at the nurse trying with tired brains to understand what she just said. Sarah had explained enough for the nurse to understand their confusion. She smiled with sympathy in her eyes, “Sarah is a nun gentleman.”

Claire was sleeping with Ian on her lap when she heard Jenny sitting next to her crying. She turned to her sister-in-law, “Jenny, he will be alright, don’t cry,” she said softly. Jenny’s big brown eyes looked so sad and so scared. Claire held her hand and spoke of Jaime’s strength, youth, and health. “He will not lose this fight, he has too much to live for.”

“How can ye be so sure Claire? Yer a doctor and maybe ye know somethin that makes ye think that.” There was so much hope in her voice that it broke Claire’s heart.

“I know it because he told me Jenny, out in the field.” Claire blushed because the comment was so unreal.

Jenny turned toward Claire and grasped her hand, “tell me what happened, everything that happened.” Her eyes were wide with wonder and excitement because Highlanders still believed in miracles, fairies, and water horses.

Claire recounted the experience she had in a moment of utter despair. “I begged him not to leave me and I heard him say I willna. It was his voice in my ear I’m sure of it. That makes me sound crazy as a loon probably.”

Jenny’s eyes were bright and she smiled at Claire, suddenly full of hope where there were fear and sadness before. She raised her hand to the flight attendant, “we need juice please, two each.” The tray tables were lowered and four glasses of juice were set down. “These are all for ye so drink up if ye want yer milk to come back.” One by one Jenny pushed the juice at Claire until all glasses were empty. “Now it’s nap time and my turn to hold the bairn.” She smiled at Ian and held her arms out.

Claire was shocked at Jenny’s complete acceptance of the interaction with Jaime in the field. Like night turning to day she was in a different world now where her brother lives. It was overwhelming to Claire, that kind of faith, and she closed her eyes to stop more input from the plane, passengers, and the noise. She went back to the field in her mind and felt his touch on her cheek.

Sarah talked to Jaime when she wasn’t praying for his recovery. She wasn’t sure what was happening to her, what had happened in the hospital church, or why she divulged to the nurse that she was a nun. “There goes my anonymity,” she told Jaime laughing. “I suppose now when someone needs a miracle they will be pounding on my door.” She laughed again, “I would give anything to see the faces of Rupert and Angus when they found out I’m a nun.” She bowed her head and prayed out loud so Jaime would hear how important he was to those that loved him.

Shawn opened the door of his trailer and counted backward from ten. Pup had Ruby on the ground in five seconds and she was laughing and screaming under the mass of brown fur that was chewing on her hair. Shawn pulled Pup off her and pulled her up, so grateful to hear her laugh. “Are ye ready for chores Ruby?” He gave her his best stern look. The two of them worked like a synchronized team bringing horses in from the pasture and getting them all fed. The swamp coolers were on but the heat was still oppressive. Shawn looked at Ruby’s red face and called her to him where he waited
to ambush her with the hose.

Ruby squealed in her delight at getting soaked by the hose grabbing it from Shawn when he wasn’t looking. Her aim was not that good and three horses got hit with the stream in her efforts to soak Shawn. They went right back to eating.

Once the grain and supplement wagon was loaded up in the other barn, Ruby pulled it from stall to stall adding the evening ration to each feeder. She looked up at Donus watching her. “He is sleeping right now but don’t worry he…” she felt her throat constrict like she was being choked and the sobs that came out of her were gut-wrenching. Shawn was walking to help Ruby and heard her gulping air and crying like she was dying. He ran to her and pulled her into his strong embrace.

“Ruby, Ruby lass, dinna fash for Jaime. He is a strong Scot and he willna leave us, I know it.” He rocked her back and forth and just held on until she was breathing normally. He pushed her hair away from her face and looked at her sad eyes. “Ye havena been able to do that until now, right lass?” She shook her head. “My sweet strong Ruby.”

As the hours of the afternoon and evening passed, Sarah continued telling Jaime about her life as a nun and her vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. “I was called to this service and never felt happier in my life. Can you imagine that level of happiness for twenty-years Jaime? When it became apparent that I was gifted in trauma counseling and I was sent to assist with natural disasters and man-made disasters all over the country. I would walk in and see hundreds of faces crying, wailing, scared to death and I would think, cheer up everyone I bring good news, the Lord thy God is here and he loves you.” She laughed. “I was tireless and I felt blessed to offer the spiritual aid those people desperately needed. When they asked me to do the same in Iraq I thought it was a perfect next step and signed on. That is where I lost my faith Jaime like having my heart pulled out of my chest. All this time I thought my faith was in a pile of debris in Iraq where I left it.” She took his hand. “Now I’m not so sure.”

Sarah prayed, silently and out loud for hours and continued telling Jaime her story in between. She wanted him to hear her voice and to know he was not alone. She picked up her cell phone and spoke to Rupert about how to get Claire and Jenny from the airport. After much talk it was decided Ruby and Rupert would drive Sarah’s car to the airport. Her Mercedes seated five with comfort and Ruby had no issues driving it, unlike Angus or Rupert who flatly refused.

She squeezed Jaime’s hand and was excited to tell him that Claire, Ian, and Jenny were here. Somewhere deep inside Jaime heard what Sarah said and the exhausting struggle to wake up had begun.
Chapter 49

The room was dark except for low lights at the head of Jaime’s bed. The machines and monitors made occasional beeps, otherwise, it was silent. Claire looked at the kindest man she had ever known lay lifeless in front of her. She pulled his hand to her chest and tried to stop crying. “This heart, it beats for you Jaime, to keep me alive so I have another day to love you. We will get through this, you and me, and I will hold you to your agreement not to leave me.” She rubbed his arm. “It might be the hardest thing you’ve ever done, but you have to fight to wake up. You have to fight Jaime, please open your eyes sweetheart as soon as you can.” Claire stood up and squared her shoulders trying to feel less out of control. “Jenny is here, so anxious to see you. I will get her.”

Claire hugged Sarah and thanked her for staying with Jaime for so long. They sat and talked while Claire watched Ruby at the vending machine. When Shawn walked up and kissed her Claire blinked several times like she was seeing the impossible. “What in God’s name is happening there?”

Sarah followed her line of sight. “Oh, well Ruby and Shawn have been in love with each other for a while I guess. They went swimming and Ruby wanted to be his girlfriend, and he taught her how to kiss, he took her virginity and she lives with him now.”

Claire looked at Sarah like she had lost her mind. “What?”

Sarah put her arm around her best friend, “never mind, you will hear all about another time. Can we make a plan Claire, I am a little worried about you, ya don’t look so good. Jenny said your milk tried up and Ian’s been on a bottle since this morning. That means you have to rest sweet one. Let me take you and Jenny home so you can take a shower and eat and hopefully close your eyes for an hour. Leave Ian with Jenny or me if that’s possible and drive yourself back when you can’t stay away any longer.”

Claire surrendered because she couldn’t put one foot in front of the other. Rupert joined them and asked if Claire knew Sarah was a nun. She smiled and looked at her friend. “Yes, I’ve known she was that special for a long time, Rupert.”

“Dr. Fraser,” the nurse called to Claire. “I think Jaime’s sister needs you can you come with me?”

As Claire walked behind the nurse she saw Jenny pushed into a corner of an exam room. The lights were off and Claire wrapped her arms around Jenny. “Oh dear God, you couldn’t have been prepared to see him like that. I should have warned you Jenny. I’m so sorry. It looks worse than it is. The head bleeds profusely but it will go back to normal so quickly. Jenny, I’m so sorry. Let’s go home and rest. We need to rest.”

Claire was pulling Ian’s things into her bag and looked up at Rupert and Angus. “How is it possible that Frank did that much damage to Jaime? Did he have a weapon up his sleeve? How?”

Angus was too tired to choose his words, “he told us to lock Frank in the office with him so he could taunt Frank into fighting him. I listened to the tape.” Angus looked at the floor getting uncomfortable. “He put the fear of God in Frank and them gave him five minutes to do his best and try to escape. Jaime just let that fucker beat him.” Course when five minutes was up he crushed his hand, took out an eye and knocked him out in less than a minute.”

Claire felt her legs get wobbly and her head was spinning. Sarah grabbed her before she pitched over and walked her to the car. Sarah glared at Angus. Time to amend our plan Claire, you put that lovely story on the back burner. Stop thinking about it until Jaime can explain. She looked into Claire
startled face. Promise me Claire! She nodded and wanted this night to be over more than her next breath.

Claire showed Jenny the guest room and prepared a bottle for Ian. She sat in the rocking chair, trying her breast first, and then the bottle. Jenny looked around with interest at the house her brother built. “There is something I want you to see Jenny. Turn on the light switches behind you.”

Jenny’s eyes went straight to the picture once the lights were on in the dining room. She walked to it and looked for five minutes before she uttered a word. “How did this, how did ye, who made this? It’s us, aye? Kind of hard to miss that actually. Wee Jaime even looks like him now. That is Ian and his child on his shoulders yer given a flower to. How in the world?”

Claire smiled at her sister in law and dear friend. I had the same reaction when I first saw it. I asked Ruby to paint it for Jaime’s birthday and I’m having one made for you and Ian, as a photograph.

Jenny turned back to the picture. “Remarkable.”

Someone knocked quietly at the front door and Claire asked Jenny to take Ian for the rest of his bottle. She warned her something big was about to happen. She braced herself and opened the door. Claire had asked Shawn to bring Pup because she was heartsick for him. Ruby pulled him gently into the house and he circled Claire crying with his head down and tail tucked. Claire felt tears coming and sat on the floor and pulled him into her lap. She wrapped her whole body around him talking to him quietly and rocking. “It’s okay Pup, I’m home for good now. Don’t cry Pup. It took a few minutes but he came around and his tail started wagging. He was fixated on Ian across the room. “There’s our baby Pup go say hello.”

It was three o’clock in the morning when Claire closed the front and then said goodnight to Jenny. Ian was asleep in the cradle and she stood under the hot shower and cried. When she laid in bed his absence was huge that she couldn’t stand it. C’mon Ian, let’s sleep with your daddy tonight.

Claire dropped the side rail of Jaime’s bed and put her head down. “We miss you Jaime so we decided to camp here in your room. If you feel cramped, well, your gonna have to wake up and tell me so.” Her struggle to fall asleep lasted about twenty seconds.

She was walking through the woods at Lallybroch with Jenny. She swatted at flies or some kind of insect that kept flying into her hair. She continued to swat at them until she woke herself up and realized something was in her hair. Claire lifted her head and saw Jaime’s hand raised two inches from her face. She looked closer and he was holding his hand up with his own power. “Sweet Jesus! Jaime, you’re waking up love! Look at what you’re doing! She held his hand to her chest and felt him squeeze her lightly. “Jaime, I love you so much, you are doing so great. Keep fighting sweetheart. I know it’s hard to wake up but you must wake up. Thank Christ!”

Jaime’s nurse burst through the door after seeing his monitors change. She looked at his hand aloft. “Looks like our boy is waking up.” She smiled at Claire.

“Looks like our boy is waking up.” She smiled at Claire.

Jaime kept knocking into Claire with his hand and she finally understood and put his palm to her mouth. Incredibly, with a shaky thumb, he wiped the tears from her cheek. The nurse mentioned the doctor started rounds in fifteen minutes and would want to test Jaime and hopefully remove the head bandages and guard in his mouth.

Ian grunted in his seat and arched his back in a deep stretch before he ramped up his whining. Claire held Jaime’s hand and kissed it over and over. “Well, your son is making his empty stomach known and if I don’t hurry he’ll have this entire ward awake.” She laid his hand down and picked up the baby. She had a bottle ready but nowhere to warm it up. She prayed and put Ian to her breast. It
didn’t feel like the milk flowed but he didn’t detach and scream. She looked down with wide eyes and huge relief. Jaime’s hand was in the air again and she helped him find his son.

When Ian was asleep again Claire laid her head next to Jaime and cuddled his hand and kissed his arm. She fell asleep like that. When the doctor looked in he told the nurse he would loop back at the end of his rounds to examine Mr. Fraser. Jaime, Claire, and Ian had some precious time to rest.

Jenny was so deep in sleep it took a second call to wake her. She patted the bed first for Ian, then the phone. Her eyes flew open to the strange room and it took a moment to remember where she was. “Hello?”

“Jenny, get ready, I’m coming to get you. Your brother’s awake! I’ll be there soon, I love you, now get up!” Claire was giggling when she clicked off.

“Rupert, Jaime is awake! No, he isn’t talking yet and no visits yet. Call Angus and Shawn. I will keep you all posted. Jaime is having a critical exam right now and we might know soon about his expected recovery. I know, me too!”

“Good morning Sarah, oh, still in bed? Well, Jaime is awake, so now you can go back to sleep.” She giggled as she hung up and piled Ian into his car seat. The Dodge roared to life and Claire smiled all the way to Ironwood Drive.

The doctor talked to Jaime as he wrote his examination notes. “I’m going to make your wife a very happy lady today. He covered Jaime’s hand. You will make a full recovery and your head wounds will heal. You can put this ordeal behind you in a few months. You rest now.”

Jaime had never known exhaustion like this before. He was relieved the room was empty and he could sleep. The effort it took to hold his hand up or move his legs and feet for the doctor was enormous. He let himself sleep and in his dreams, he felt her cool hands on his eyelids. “My love,” she said.

Shawn looked down at his phone and clicked off. “Thank God” he murmured. He stepped into Ruby’s shower and pulled her to him. He told her Jaime was awake and caught her around the waist before she could jump out. He pressed her against the wall and held her hands up. “No visitors, horses are fed, it’s one thousand degrees outside, Pup is gone. Do you know what that means Ruby? Each statement came with a kiss down Ruby’s neck. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing deeply. “It means yer mine until turn out time and that is three hours from now. He kissed her deeply.”

Once the water was turned off the urgency was on, in a big way. Shawn kissed the half-dried Ruby to his bed sending cups and dishes flying when he bumped them into the counter. He looked down at her like she was a banquet for a starving man and then he devoured her. They had not made love since the first night and Shawn had pushed back on his need to give Ruby some space. He lavished Ruby with pleasure until she grabbed him and he stopped. “What was it you wanted me to give you?”

Shawn looked at her confused. “You said give it to me Ruby.”

Shawn smiled, he pushed her arms over her head. “I said I want yer pussy Ruby now give it to me.” Ruby gasped when he entered her. Slowly he continued while she was locked in his deep kiss. As soon as Ruby’s body had adjusted to the intrusion she raised her hips to meet his thrusting. She was lost in the experience and looked at Shawn like he was the only man alive. To Ruby, he was.
The rules were still strictly enforced in intensive care, one person at a time. Jenny stayed with Jaime through the day and Claire would be there all night. Claire knew Jaime would relax with his sister and sleep when he needed to. Jenny told him about the stakes she and Claire pounded into the ground under the tall tree canopy. “That is yer future house and Claire better go back to doctorin and make a lot of money because it is enormous.” She read to him quietly and talked about things happening with neighbors and friends he knew. She laid her head on his bed and slept for an hour in the afternoon.

Jenny ran her hand up Jaime’s arm. “Claire is here to take me back Jaime. She’ll be back after she drops me.” I love ye brother. See ye tomorrow. She dropped her hand in his and felt him squeeze. Jaime fell back into the blackness of his exhaustion. It felt like he had laid in this bed for years and he wondered why he had not recovered in all that time.

Jenny’s ticket back to Scotland was left open so she could decide the best time to come back home. She was just starting her fourth month of pregnancy and felt great physically so when Ian encouraged her to stay another week it was an easy decision.

Claire was anxious to get back on Jag after almost a year. She left the hospital an hour early one morning and ran home to dress in riding clothes and feed Ian. She tapped on Jenny’s door and handed her a sleeping Ian in his seat and told her to go back to sleep for an hour.

Claire and Pup walked down the road to the barn and she was so excited it was an effort not to run. Pup beat her and was giving Jag his morning licks when Claire entered the stall with her brush bucket. “Hi handsome. You ready to stretch your legs?”

Claire swung up on Jag and when her seat made contact with the saddle she exhaled at the pleasure. It felt like home and she wondered what her muscle condition was. She pushed Jag into a trot, canter, and extended trot before rolling her hips forward signaling to Jag it was time to fly. He soared over ten jumps like he was saying "this is what we do together and I missed you!"  “Oh my God that was fun Jag! I have missed you so much.” She dropped down on his neck and rubbed his shoulder while he cooled down.

When Claire brought Jenny back in the late afternoons, they would walk down to the barn and check in with Rupert and Angus, watch Ruby and Shawn ride, or walk to Sarah’s and put their feet and legs in the cool water. Claire’s heartbeat would speed up when she and Ian were back in the truck heading to Jaime. She could not wait to see him, every day.

She placed Ian’s seat next to the bed and ran her hand down Jaime’s arm. His head bandages and mouth guard had been removed and the swelling had decreased significantly. She gazed at him, “you’re still the most handsome man I’ve ever seen.” He squeezed her arm and said, “ I love Claire.”

“What? You what? Jaime, you just spoke to me. You spoke to me and I love you too. I am so happy to hear your voice again.”

He rolled his head to look at her. “beautiful S-snach... son”

“Your son is right here and he is waking up at the moment. Very good timing Ian.” She smiled so brightly and Jaime watched her.

“Tired” and point at Claire.

“Oh, I’m alright, better than alright. She sat on the bed and put Ian to her breast. Jaime lifted his hand and Claire guided it to the baby’s head.
The days passed with Claire riding every morning, Jenny taking care of her brother, and Jaime recovering. At night Claire would sleep in a chair next to his bed.

Jaime was moved to a private room where visitors could come for two hours daily in the morning and afternoon. Rupert and Angus would come together and feast their eyes on the man they missed. Ruby and Sarah would visit together and do their best to make Jaime laugh.

Jaime reached for Sarah’s hand and held it firmly. She looked down in surprise and then at Jaime. “Thank ye for what ye did Sarah. You made a deal for my life did ye naught?”

“How could you possibly know anything about that?” Sarah was shocked.

“Did ye pay lass?”

“I did. I heard my first Mass in ten years the day you woke up. I’m happier for it. I’ve missed God. How could you know?”

“I heard ye, I think. I’m grateful Sarah.”

She kissed his cheek. “It did as much for me Jaime.”

Claire was so happy Jaime was out of intensive care. She could cuddle in bed with him and lay Ian between them so Jaime could touch him. His balance was returning along with his strength so she knew he would flying under own power soon. While he needed her she loved helping.

Claire walked to the barn early in the morning. The rays of the sun were just breaking over the mountain and she walked with a purpose today. Walking down the main aisle with her brush box in hand and stopped at Donus’s stall. “It's you and me today big guy.” She strode into his stall and talked softly to him while she brushed him. “Poor baby, look at that knotted tail. No worries, I’ll fix it soon. Today we ride.” She was very relieved when he took the bit so willingly. She dropped Jaime’s saddle on his back and held her breath. Once the girth was tight she walked him to the indoor arena and simply swung up into the saddle. She let him wander while she adjusted her stirrups and pulled on her gloves. When she set his head and spoke with her legs Donus was ready to work.

Claire exhaled in gratitude as they worked through the gates and sailed over a dozen jumps. When they were both covered in sweat she ran her hand down his neck. “Thank you Donus, you are really a special horse.”

Rupert and Angus were just coming to work, arguing about something and not paying attention until they passed the arena and saw the impossible. “Sweet Christ, the lass is ridin Donus. If she doesna get off she’ll join Jaime in the hospital. They both watched her with their mouths open, holding their breath waiting for Donus to freak out. “He and the lass are soakin wet. She worked him out. By herself. He let her!”

“You two know I can hear you right?” They gave their usual blank stare which ordinarily threw Claire into a rage where she would chase one or both with a crop above her head, but not today. They could be as rude as they wanted and it would not affect her. Her man was coming home today and life would slowly return to normal. She was incredibly happy.

Jenny opted to wait for Jaime to get home rather than get in the way at the hospital. She had a lot f cooking to do for his first day home. Claire was glad to have some private time with Jaime. She needed to have a conversation and wanted to do it here so they could leave in behind them.

“Why did you do it Jaime?” She looked in his eyes searching for the truth.
Jaime knew what she was asking and cleared his throat. He looked at her with all the love he felt, and then told her. “Money can buy a man’s freedom these days Claire. Frank has that kind of money. I thought it unlikely he would even go to trial. His family would pay off and pressure who they had to, and when the sensation died down he would be acquitted. I just couldn’t let that happen, Claire.” He looked up at her hoping to see understanding and peace.

“You let him almost kill you Jaime.”

He reached for her and she backed away.

Jaime dropped his head and exhaled. “I spent so many hours considering the outcome of my meeting with Frank. I wanted to kill him and could have easily. But you would lose a husband, Ian a father, and me, the love of my life. Frank would be dead and so would we, at least in our hearts. If he bought his freedom, how long could we live in fear that Frank would steal Ian for leverage over ye. It would be easiest for him to disappear with our son and string ye along while he faced trial. If we ever got him back what would be left of our sanity?” He looked at Claire and she knew he meant her sanity and he was right, it would destroy her.

“I took away his career by breaking every bone in his right hand. I crushed the bones so there was nothing to set. I destroyed his thumb so he could never hold a scalpel again. I took his eye so he will be disabled forever. I should have taken both, I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“I have over a hundred pictures of what he did. Rupert and Angus were diligent in that regard. I have a tape recording of Frank becoming the animal he is. I will send them to every news outlet in Boston, the police, and the District Attorney. It was the only way I could keep everyone honest and shut down his resources. I’m sorry Claire. It was a risk and I knew that before I locked him in my office and gave him every reason to kill me.”

Jaime looked at the floor. Not out of shame but to avoid Claire’s judgemental eyes. Without looking up he told her the rest. “Ye say ye love me, but ye canna love only parts of me that are palatable Claire. To keep my family safe, I would do it again, without question, though I may only give him four minutes the next time.”

Jaime looked up at Claire’s startled face and wanted to beg her to understand, but he had said his peace. It was up to Claire now.

“Who helped you? I want to know which team members assisted this brutality.” Her voice was shaking and her eyes glassy from tears.

“None of them knew my plan once he was locked in the office with me. They would not have helped.”

“Your bloody right they wouldn’t have helped. You almost died!”

Jaime put his hand up. He looked directly at her. “Let’s put this in perspective Sassenach. Ian is on the back porch and you run in and grab yer phone that’s ringin. Two minutes and yer back outside but Ian is gone. That evenin, after making ye suffer, someone calls and gives ye instructions on what to say and to whom.” He paused. “What blood would ye be willin to spill then Claire?”

“Oh dear God,” she dropped her face into her hands. Her mind started out like a tornado and now it was empty like her worry and righteousness had abandoned her. She felt his warm hand on her back.

“I’ll no be judged for bein the man that I am. I have parts that are ugly to one so fair as you Sassenach. I’ll wait while you decide how ye feel about me now.”
Ian was awake holding Jaime’s fingers all the way home. Claire smiled at them but she felt her head and heart were somehow disconnected from each other leaving her confused, scared and lonely.

When Jaime was settled Claire strapped Ian into his sling and left the house. Jaime called Sarah. “Claire needs ye Sarah, if ye can, try to intercept her before she gets lost in this heat. I know what she has to say and I hope ye can help her say it.” He laid back on the pillows and tried to relax. His face was throbbing, his wife went walking, his sister was making plans to go home. Not the homecoming he hoped for. Please Sassenach, I am what I am, part of me is violent when it’s time for that. If ye deem me less of a good man I’ll see it in yer eyes lass and how can I live with that?

Sarah whistled when she saw Claire walking up into the foothills. She sat Claire at her kitchen table and poured her a lemon aid. “You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. What’s up?”

Claire looked up and blushed, “naw I’m alright.”

Sarah smiled at her friend knowingly. “You don’t want to betray Jaime by talking about him. I understand Claire. You have permission. From Jaime.”

Claire jerked her head up. “What does that mean?”

“He called and told me you need to talk about him and he understands Claire. Let me help you figure this out.”

Claire explained to Sarah that Jaime locked Frank in his office and taunted him promising five minutes to beat him unimpeded, “and he almost died because of it. He was so ruthless and cold-blooded, telling Frank what he would do to him, and then did it.”

“So, you’re mad at Jaime for hurting Frank?”

“No, never! I know what Frank would have done given the chance. He would have kidnapped Ian and used him to manipulate my testimony.” Claire’s arms went protectively around Ian.

“Sweet Jesus!” Sarah’s eyes were huge. She was starting to see the bigger picture. “So now you don’t trust Jaime to cross the street without throwing himself under a car?”

“Of course not! I mean that’s not it. I can’t make peace with the brutality and premeditation. I didn’t know he was so violent.”

Sarah tread carefully here seeing a possible beam of light on Claire’s truth. The truth she wouldn’t see. “He crashed into this house and killed a man right in front of you Claire. From what you said the night you were drunk he crushed their skulls with a log and they bled out in front of you.”

“Claire was trying to understand the difference because Sarah was right. That did happen and she never recoiled from his violence then. She stared straight ahead remembering. “They were going to rape and kill me. I never thought anything bad about what he did that night.”

Sarah pushed, hoping Claire could come to terms with what she truly found intolerable. “You told me Jaime swung from a corral pole and kicked Laoghaire in the head as she was about to stab Jag. Do I remember that correctly?”

Claire stared at nothing, nodding her head. A fat tear fell down her cheek and then another on her other cheek. She put her arms around Ian and cried.

“Why is this time so different that it shakes the very love you feel for your husband Claire?” she
waited. “Claire?”

“Because I am the cause, I brought Frank here and it forced Jaime to risk his life,” she whispered like she didn’t want to hear it. “Through my association, I pitted these two men against each other and Jaime almost died… because of me!” She suddenly looked at her friend with wide fearful eyes, “Sarah, I fucked up.” Claire stood and walked out the front door needing to get home on the pronto.

When she came through the front door Jenny heard her crying. “What’s happened Claire?” She tried to help Claire’s frantic attempt to pull the sling off and hand Ian to Jenny. “Please take Ian so I can speak with Jaime.”

Jenny watched her jump two steps at a time and close the door quietly.

Claire pulled her clothes off sobbing uncontrollably. She sat next to Jaime on the bed and started unbuttoning his shirt. He was watching her with concern. She opened his shirt and carefully laid against his skin. His arms came slowly around her, still not sure what her tears were for. She held him so tight and cried so hard and he just held onto her. He had seen his wife cry many times but never like this and it scared him to the bone.

Jaime waited and tried to understand what words she could get out between sobs. He thought he heard I’m sorry, he definitely heard I love you, all your parts, love all your parts, perfect man… He rolled to the side so he could see her face even though it made his head pound unmercifully.

"It was me…it was my fault you almost died…I brought Frank…I was so mean to you…I love you…my hero…such a good man.” She was still crying very hard, and gulping breath. Jaime smiled at his love trying push words out like her life depended on it. "Best man… ever… I almost lost you… couldn’t cope … my fault Jaime."

Jaime laughed doing all he could not to jump up and dance a jig. “Thank Christ” he whispered before rocking his hysterical wife.

“I didn’t.. couldn’t… I wouldn’t… bigger..you’re bigger than everyone…I love all your parts”

“I think I ken, love.” He kissed her quickly when he had the chance. He held her for the next fifteen minutes and felt her body jerk with involuntary hiccups. His face was pounding painfully but he couldn’t let her go, not yet.

When Claire came back to her senses she quickly pulled Jaime back up on the pillows and looked into his tired eyes. “I’m sorry I judged you for taking care of your family. You are the same perfect Jaime you were before all this happened.” She looked at his battered face and lifted his hand to her lips. “Thank you Jaime for saving us.”

Jaime pushed her hair behind her ear and ran his finger along her jaw before touching her lips. “I think I smell calcannon and something else…” He put his head back to ease the throbbing and smiled at the aroma coming from the kitchen. “That is Parton Bree, with bangers and mash, I know it.” Claire thought her heart would melt looking at his happy face.

“I think we should dine together up here.” She jumped up and moved assorted baby items off the round table in their room. She slipped into a sundress and ran downstairs to inform Jenny she was Jaime’s gift from Scotland tonight. The women brought trays of food upstairs and loaded Jaime’s bed server with dishes from home. Claire raved about the food and Jenny blushed. Jaime was quiet, smiling, and chewing his mouth full of food. The three of them enjoyed laughter, old stories, secrets that only Jenny and Jaime knew and Claire felt so happy and close to them.
“I have to get the baby, does anyone need anything?” Before Claire could get downstairs Ian was really wailing. Claire pulled him to her cheek and felt him rooting for food. “My little darling is hungry. Let’s get you fed too.” Pup trotted along behind them. Where ever Ian was, Pup was laying nearby and it touched Claire’s heart to see Pups devotion. Jenny and Jaime were laughing about an old story when Claire sat in the slide rocker with a deep sigh.

Jaime watched Ian suckle his mother and felt his arms burning to hold him. “Soon I can catch up for the week of you two I missed.”

Jenny had a bright smile and looked at Claire. “Angus stopped by while you were at the hospital. He went on and on about you ridin Donus.”

Jaime’s juice shot out of his mouth and onto his empty plates. “Sassenach! Do ye have a death wish lass?” His eyes were as big as saucers.

Claire’s head was back and she smiled. “That is one very special horse, and I told him so.”

“He took the bit for ye then?”

Claire knew Jaime was coming undone and wanted all the details. She looked at him. "Walk, trot, canter, extended trot, maybe a dozen jumps, flying lead changes…yep that’s everything." She giggled at Jaime’s face. I didn’t ruin your monster horse. We had a moment and I love him. Seriously, I hope you don’t mind. He needed to get out and move a bit. She lifted her eyebrows at Jaime.

He smiled at Claire and his face was full of pride. “Well, if he was going to put his trust in anyone besides me, it would have to be you Sassenach. Thank ye for carin for him.”

She smiled in happy relief and continued rocking.
Chapter 50

Claire held Ian and the glider pushed back and forth. She was lost in her thoughts until she felt her son yank on her hair. She looked down and he smiled at her and yanked again. He let go of the nipple to give her a smile and some ‘oohs’ and ‘yaaaa.’

“Listen, little man, you are not allowed to hurt Mommy so stop pulling my hair.” She made a face at him and Ian kicked his legs and made every sound he knew grabbing more of Claire’s hair and pulling. She tickled him and Ian squealed “da-da-da-da!”

Claire laughed at her son, “your da is not here to help you darling.”

Jamie walked into the room smiling, “oh, I don’t know about that.” He leaned over Claire’s shoulder to smile at Ian. That depends on what ye’ve done to the lady.”

When Ian saw his father his little body erupted and six different squeals came out while arms and legs kicked and punched.

“I see.” Jaime rubbed his chin. I’ll have to hear from the lady now.” He leaned deeper and kissed Claire’s neck. “What heinous act has this scoundrel done to ye then?”

Ian squealed and followed Jaime with his eyes. “Da-da-da-d-d-da!”

Jaime pulled his son into his arms. “Yer punishment is to walk Pup with yer father.” Pup trotted after them. Where Ian went Pup went.

Claire thought she would die of loneliness for Jaime. The feeling of abandonment would grip her whenever he turned away from her. She felt her tears come and she didn’t bother wiping them away. It seemed they never stopped anymore.

It was the beginning of November. Ian was in his fourth month of life and thriving. The equestrian center was full with a waiting list. The serious eventers in the Phoenix metro area all wanted the amenities they offered such as the cross country, stadium jumping and a new dressage ring. Having access to the famous Jaime Fraser was just icing on the cake.

Claire was his wife, his rider, and his date at fancy functions but she wasn’t his lover anymore. Jaime felt so uncomfortable in the bedroom with her he usually used any excuse to get out. Claire’s mind went back to the first attempt at sex and the catastrophic pain that seized Jaime’s face. It laid waste to him for a day and nothing helped, it just slowly went away. It shook Jaime to the core but he was ready to try again a week later. Claire kept him on his back and straddled him. All the parts were working but when his heart started pounding that vice clamped down on his face and crippled him with pain. He couldn’t eat, open his eyes, talk, or move for about twelve hours. Jaime’s doctor did not have a clue and referred Jaime to the top neurologists in Phoenix but they could not help him.

Then it happened out on the field when Jaime and Shawn were lifting a heavy jump. When Jaime bent and lifted, Shawn said a horrible sound came out of him and he dropped like a stone. Claire ran across the field praying he was alive. How could the human body endure that level of pain and live? When the paramedics tried to lift him to a gurney he passed out. Claire almost lost her mind with worry until the painful grip started to lessen about twelve hours later.

Claire scoured the internet and sent hundreds of letters and emails all over the world asking if this was known to anyone. Several nights per week she stayed up hunched over her laptop either writing letters or reading research papers. When the attacks began she was sure that someone in the world
had identified the disorder and found a way to treat it. Time chipped away at her hope and now she checked her email a few times a week out of habit.

When her email popped up her eyes scanned down her inbox list and she gasped seeing a response from a medical research group in Switzerland.

Dear Dr. Fraser,

I am so very sorry to hear of your husband’s symptoms. If we are correct he is suffering from Trigeminal neuroglia caused by compression of the Trigeminal nerve. Due to his age and good health, my guess is there was trauma to the neck and this is the result.

I am doing the decompression surgery here in Switzerland. I am happy to inform you that the top surgeon for this procedure is at Rutgers Neurological Institute. He has an impressive success rate of ninety-five percent. Patients wake up from surgery and have no more pain!

Without the decompression surgery, there is no treatment. The episodes will continue and the nerve becomes more and more damaged. Suicidal pain syndrome is not uncommon.

I am forwarding your letter to doctor Liu at Rutgers. He will be expecting your call. Godspeed and a merciful recovery for your husband.

Claire stopped reading and fired off an email request to Dr. Liu to receive them as soon as possible. Over the next week, she corresponded with doctor Liu, answered pages of health and symptom questionnaires, and arranged to have Jaime’s medical records and most recent scans sent by overnight delivery. Liu’s team was sharp, practiced, and very thorough. Claire just stayed out of their way and let them tell her where to be and when. When she finally spoke to doctor Liu she cried through half the conversation. He was very compassionate and told her Jaime’s procedure would be one the easiest he has done.

Doctor Liu’s team consulted with Claire almost daily and it was determined that Jaime would be put under for the flight to avoid triggering another episode with the changing cabin pressure during flight. Claire just said yes a lot and let Liu’s team make the arrangements and decisions. Claire was happier with each passing day and it was time to tell Jaime. They were set to leave tomorrow.

Claire worked with Rupert and Angus to ensure the business would be managed in their absence. Ruby, Shawn, and Sarah were onboard and Jaime was blissfully unaware. Claire decided to tell Jaime during dinner where he could look at the Lallybroch picture while she talked. She was terrified he would accuse her of any number of terrible things. I’ll take my chances she thought. For your life Jaime, I would walk through fire.

Claire sat down at the table and took his hand. “I want to visit New Jersey tomorrow and I want you to come with me Jaime.” While he stared at her in disbelief she filled him in on all the arrangements and explained why she had not shared this with him. She completely lost it halfway through and Jaime could see the fear, strain, and love in her face. He pulled her to the sofa and held her hands.

I dinna ken how long I could withstand the attacks Sassenach. Something that debilitating I ken would kill me soon. I have been so worried about ye lass and not a clue what to do. He touched her cheek, “I ken why ye didna tell me, I ken I’ll be on unconscious before we even leave Phoenix. You did this to save me and ye’ll be watchin over me the whole time. I’m ready Sassenach and I’m grateful, so very grateful. Jaime had fat hopeful tears spilling over. Claire smiled and leaned over to kiss his cheek but when she got close she exhaled through normal breathing and the pressure from her breath threw Jaime into a fierce attack. She saw his teeth clamp shut and eyes squeeze and his body contracted into a human knot.
Claire pushed him down on the sofa and raced to turn the lights off and adjust the vents to blow heated air away from him. She gave him a shot of Morphine and sat down on the floor. She could do little more than whisper from a distance. She told him she was going to pack and get her medical bag ready.

At midnight she dropped a pillow next to the couch and laid down. By this time tomorrow he will be pain-free she kept repeating until she fell asleep.

Doctor Liu’s team had arranged every detail for transporting Jaime. At Sky Harbor, they followed special signs to a medical transport runway. Someone was waiting curbside to remove Claire’s truck to a parking garage and a porter gathered their bags. They entered the almost empty terminal and found their seats to wait for the plane. Jaime held Claire’s hand and rubbed his thumb across her knuckles. A woman approached them and introduced herself.

“Hello, I am Amanda and I will be assisting you in flight Dr. Fraser. She shook Jaime’s hand carefully, “you get to sleep through all the tough stuff, lucky man. We are ready for take off so if you would like to board it’s all set up for you.” She smiled again and walked away.

The plane had eight seats toward the front and a full medical setup in back. The monitors, bed, trays, and IV stands were all secured to the plane. The assistant played with Ian while Claire helped Jaime change into a hospital gown and settle on the flight bed. He was scared, she could see this was overwhelming him. She covered him with a thin blanket once he was laying down. Jaime watched her prepare the IV equipment and open a venipuncture kit. She tied rubber tubing around Jaime’s bicep and slapped his arm. When she bent to insert the needle his hand stayed her and she looked up at his scared eyes.

“Am I gonna die Sassenach?”

She wanted to kiss him more than she wanted to live another day but she couldn’t. She showed him her heart and let her emotions play across her face. “No love.”

“So all that I want ye to hear can wait?”

“For the next fifty or sixty years.” She said quietly. “I will be right here every minute. If the flight triggers an episode, you won’t feel it.” She smiled, “Are you ready for a nice nap?”

He took a deep breath. “Aye. I love ye Claire.”

Claire pushed the needle into a sideline and watched Jaime’s eyes get droopy. “Goodnight sweet prince.” She looked at the medical assistant, “he is out Amanda.”

The assistant picked up a clipboard and started charting vitals then picked up a phone to tell the captain they were strapping in.

Claire fastened her seat belt and checked Ian’s seat. She smiled at him chewing on a toy. He was happy today and kicked his feet looking at his mother. “DA-da-da. Oh! Ooh.” He reached his toy toward Claire and kept babbling until she took it. He watched her closely and when she put it to her mouth he rewarded her with a giant smile.

For each leg of the journey, someone was waiting to take them further. She was so focused on monitoring Jaime and watching over Ian that when they separated her to the hospital waiting room she felt panic grip her. From the moment she read the first email her mission to save Jaime demanded every brain cell and all her energy and suddenly it was all stop, and she and Ian stood in the hall watching them take her husband away.
Claire sat in a secluded corner of the hospital waiting room and nursed Ian. Jaime would be face down with the back of his neck opened up exposing a tiny passageway to insert an endoscope. Doctor Liu would find the Trigeminal nerve and follow it to the compression. Pushing the artery off the nerve and securing it with a Teflon implant and they were done.

Claire rocked back and forth, more for herself than Ian who was gorging on her milk. Over two hundred decompression procedures to date and ninety-five percent are pain-free, she thought. This will work and Jaime will be free of Frank’s final insult. She let herself look to the future with Jaime’s health restored and the thriving equine center. She started to hum and closed her eyes feeling Ian drift off to chase his own dreams.

Doctor Liu walked through the door looking for Claire. She searched his face and he was smiling. The surgery was absolutely textbook perfect he told her. He expected Jaime to make a full recovery. He patted her arm and walked swiftly away. Claire typed a text message and sent it off to the team and Sarah. She was exhausted but found it hard not to jump up and down in a laughing scream. It’s over, she thought, take a breath and plan your future with this amazing man.

They had been home for two weeks and enjoyed a close companionship that was pure gold to both of them. They played with Ian and Claire had her first taste of true freedom when she handed a sleepy baby to Jaime with a bottle for the next feeding and left for the barn. She was starting to ween Ian but wanted to take it slow. She wondered if that was for her benefit or his.

The steep grade of the foothills allowed Claire to see the entire property from the driveway. So much had changed so fast she just wanted to take it all in. She saw the two barns and all the horse's heads hanging out the half doors. There was a trainer in the arena working with two eventers, polishing their stadium jumping. She saw a backhoe in the field and Rupert pointing to where he should dig the large holes for the trees to be planted.

Building the cross country course had become their passion. It went from moderate green pasture to groves of orange, grapefruit, and peach, leading to deeply wooded with water features, steep hills, ditches, and cliff jumps for the upper levels to test their courage and soil their breeches.

When Jaime was at the city filing for permits he noticed the property next to their field was marked for water retention and was not zoned for structures of any kind. Barren land to stay that way for years to come. Jaime cut a deal with the owner to pay a nice sum each year to use it for jumping horses. He insisted on creating the jumps from what was already there strewn around the desert floor. Nothing artificial, no nails or plastic, this part of the course would be a testament and provide the experience of the old pony express riders galloping across the desert going from town to town.

She smiled watching the moody chickens come running out of the coup. One of the twenty would start running and making noise and soon the whole group was running, looking pissed off and confused. The coup was of course turned into a jump of sorts and Claire hoped to harvest enough fresh eggs for the whole team, year around. They were just babies and would grow another four months before the first egg could be taken. Claire loved the chickens because they pulled the stress out of her when she watched them. By midday, they would be scattered throughout the field and come running when they heard the feed bag open and the crumble pouring into feeders.

A huge nursery truck pulled slowly down the driveway with boxed trees purchased for shade and heat tolerance. They were big and beautiful, already in their fifth year. She followed the sloping pasture, molded by the natural grade of the foothills and saw Star and her filly in the Dam’s pasture eating high nutrient winter grasses and plants. The filly was almost five months old and being weaned slowly. She stood elegantly next to Star and ate whatever mom ate.

Claire watched Ruby finish up with one of the greenies, walking to let him cool off. Claire loved
Ruby like a little sister and smiled at her calm expression. Rupert walked toward her with another horse and Ruby jumped down. Before they could trade Shawn jumped over the arena fence and threw Ruby over his shoulder handing the reins to Rupert while Ruby squealed with delight. Shawn took his prize to the back of the property where his trailer sat waiting to host a delicious mid-day romp. Claire laughed out loud at the frustration on Rupert’s face as he led both horses back to the barn.

Except for the chickens and the desert addition, every stick and stone was conjured from Jaime’s mind during the lonely, hot, miserable nights when all he had was a barn on dirt and a rusty round pen. That man has an impressive vision she thought shaking her head.

The Pony Club had a writing contest and chose one contestant to write a feature article on anything equestrian. Claire remembered a young girl walking down the main aisle looking around for her hero. She had bright red hair and a face full of freckles. Jaime was very formal as he shook her hand and offered her a chair in the office. The little charmer had a list of questions but when the drawings of the cross country course came out she was enraptured. Claire remembered signaling to the girl's mother to come and look at Jaime and the girl hunched over his large drawings like the rest of the world didn’t exist. She was a very talented writer and the article featured the Fraser field catching the interest of top eventers in the area. That was only one month ago and now there was a waiting list for their stalls and amenities.

Angus walked through the barn looking for Rupert. He finally saw him at the far end of the new barn leaning out the big doors with something in his hand. As Angus got closer he was confused because it was a fishing pole Rupert had and he was casting it toward the outside. Angus stopped next to him and watched, “what are ye doin?”

Rupert’s tongue was poking out the side of his mouth as he concentrated on his casting. “Damn!” He reeled in as a yellow sticky note bounced along the ground with a hook through it. Angus watched him cast again and the hook bounced off Shawn’s trailer. Rupert looked deflated and swore in Gaelic. The sticky note bounced back on the hook looking less yellow than its last trip.

Angus smiled wryly at Rupert. “Ye trying to get the note to stick on the trailer? Let me try, I’ll show ye how to do it.” Angus gave it two tries and asked Rupert why he wanted to stick the note to Shawn’s trailer.

“Claire asked me to remind Shawn the vet is comin later so he can help the lass.”

“Why not walk up and stick it on wi’ye hands?”

“Rupert shook his head vigorously. “Ruby’s in there too.”

“So what? Give me the note “ Angus strode toward the trailer just as Ruby let out an orgasmic scream full of detail.

Angus dropped the note, Rupert dropped the fishing pole and the two ran for the cover of the barn.

After three horses Claire headed up to the house to let Ian relieve the pressure in her breasts. She slipped into the house and heard a long string of Gaelic, spoken with a loud temper. Jamie had dragged the rocker into his study so he could rock Ian and watch game highlights.

“Jaime?”

“Ah, Sassenach.” He looked around and then patted Ian’s butt as he slept draped over Jaime’s massive shoulder.
“What are you doing?

Jaime stood up and Ian slid from his shoulder into his arms. He kissed Claire’s cheek. We were… watching the game.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever smelled this bad in my life so keep him for five minutes please and I’ll run through the shower.”

Aromatherapy filled the bathroom and Claire relaxed under the hot water. With her hair in a towel and a short soft robe, she laid on the bed with pillows behind her and took Ian who was now cooing to his father. She settled Ian on her legs and he tried to smile at her while chewing on his fist. Claire pulled the fist out and Ian was happy with the trade.

Jaime loved to watch the two of them and as she moved Ian to the other side her robe pulled open and his eyes moved slowly down her body. She was the same funny girl he caught sleeping in a stall two years ago. So much goodness and beauty, so much love she had for everyone around her. Even if the pain came again and he died from it, he wanted to be loving her when it happened.

He sat on the bed and massaged her feet as Ian finished eating. The baby had drooping eyes and struggled to keep sucking until sleep won. He looked at Claire staring at him and he smiled as he reached to take Ian downstairs to his crib. He touched her face, “will ye stay here until I get back Sassenach?”

The energy had changed in the room and Claire felt her heart rate climb with anticipation. To touch his skin again and run her hand down his back would be like heaven, she thought. She closed her eyes at the delicious memory. She would follow him to places only the poets tried to describe. The place where their truest hearts reside, and they had not been there for months. She heard the water turn off in the shower and felt nervous and anxious for him to touch her. If she didn’t calm down she would ruin everything.

“Sassenach, why the sad face love?” He walked around the bed like a stalking panther, watching her. No mask in place she saw his raw emotion, powerful and lusty. Her body responded in preparation. His eyes sparkled as he slid next to her. “I have a need for you, my Sassenach.”

Claire pushed him to the bed hoping to keep him safe but he overruled and pulled her back down beside him. “No need to be safe love,” he whispered. “If ye dinna mind, I’ll lead.” His kisses were soft and romantic as they touched each other getting reacquainted. Claire almost passed out trying not to breathe on his face and spark another attack.

Jaime watched her catch her breath. “Mo chridhe, if ye hold yer breath ye won’t make it to the finish line. I’m afraid I canna kiss ye anymore.”

“What? Why not? I’m alright, you can kiss me.”

Jaime looked at her. “Ye have to prove it lass. My face is a birthday candle and the wick keeps jumpin around, ye have to blow it out.” He touched his forehead and she blew on it. He touched his neck, she blew. When he touched his cheek, Claire hesitated and then blew. He continued making her blow on his face until he crushed her to his lips and deepened the kiss. They kissed and teased with tongues, hands roamed, and day eased into evening.

Jaime got up and went downstairs leaving a curious Claire looking after him. He was back with their best whisky and two glasses. They sipped and talked a bit until Jaime threw his back and pulled her under him. She felt his hard length and wanted him inside her. “I want you Jaime,” she whispered.
He licked her breast and kissed from her nipple to mouth making her pant. Then the other nipple licking and kissing down to her navel. He watched her breasts move with the rise and fall of her panting chest. “I have a problem here Sassenach,” he licked lightly between her legs and heard her gasp. “My stomach is empty and growling.” He laid his tongue against her heat and wickedly push her over the edge, holding her close until she landed. “How does Chinese sound?”

Claire was confused, “what?”

“Chinese, love, food.” He reached for his phone and dialed in an order. Stay right there Sassenach, I have somethin to show ye.”

Claire pushed herself up on the pillows and Jaime came back with a roll of drafting paper that he unrolled across her legs. He pointed to various jumps, angles, and other attributes of the desert addition. His fingers caressed her skin under the paper making her pant again. He pulled her to his mouth and kissed her deeply right before the doorbell rang.

Claire was shaking with need but the smell of food made her mouth water. Jaime spread the plates and containers between them and they talked and ate and sipped whisky. Claire started to shove the food back into the bags and Jaime ran them downstairs. He came back with one of Claire’s favorite candles and turned off every light.

Jaime pulled Claire into his arms and kissed her deeply sparking up the heat again in seconds. He felt her need and she whispered in his ear what she wanted. Being in full agreement he settled between her legs and looked in her eyes. “I will spend the rest of my life thankin ye Sassenach.” He crushed her mouth as he invaded her body and forced himself to halt and wait for Claire. He kissed and sucked on her neck and breasts until she pushed against him and moaned his name.

Jaime kept his pace slow and lavished his wife with her favorite kisses and places to suck. He pushed deeply into her body as they celebrated undying love. Looking in Jaime’s eyes she felt him reach deep inside of her and offer his hand. She took it and felt a wave of love wash over her. They were together again and would wake on the other side of all the tragedy they had lived through in the last four months. As Jaime gripped her in orgasm she held him tightly. I will never let go, she thought.
Chapter 51

December 2021

Jenny placed a large tray of hors d'oeuvres on the coffee table and told everyone to grab something when they got hungry. Claire was on top of a ladder placing the tree topper on straight with Jaime holding on so she didn’t pitch into the tree. Ian and wee Jaime were on their hands and knees untangling another string of lights. Jaime picked up baby Ian before he could grab the sharp metal hooks for the ornaments.

The tree was fresh cut yesterday and filled the house with a beautiful pine scent. They had all piled into two trucks and enjoyed a snowy day in the mountains. When the tree was cut and fastened to Jaime’s truck they drank hot chocolate and watched the kids play in the snow. Little Ian found the cold white stuff very funny and offered a handful to Claire. She knelt and stuck her tongue into his palm pulling the snow into her mouth and making Ian laugh. It had been a glorious day in the Arizona mountains.

Claire looked at all the lights on the floor. “I don’t think there is enough tree for all those.”

“Well,” Ian looked around, “we got so good at untangling them I guess I didn’t want to stop.”

A baby cried from the bedroom and Jenny emerged with her sweet daughter Annie who was not happy about waking up hungry and alone. Jenny settled into the rocker and fed her.

Whisky was poured and they all stood back to admire the tree so far. There were still ornaments to put up and some tinsel before they could wrap up this project. Pup followed Ian around but found the constant happiness with his humans a wonderful thing.

“Hey Jamie, where are Rupert and Angus, I haven’t seen them since we got here.”

“They went home to Scotland for the holidays Ian. Be back after Hogmanay.”

The doorbell rang and Claire opened the door for Ruby and Shawn. Jenny called from her rocking chair, “come over here Ruby, let me see that ring!”

“Did I tell ye what Shawny here did before he proposed Ian? He drove out to Palm Desert and spoke to Ruby’s parents, to ask for her hand. Who says the Scottish are barbarians!”

Little Ian raised his arms to Ruby and she sat on the floor to give him a big hug. Wee Jaime wandered over and soon Ruby was on her back with two boys on top of her and Pup nipping her hair. She was laughing but grateful when Jaime pulled the kids off of her and helped her up.

Later, when Claire got ready for bed she wrapped her arms around Jaime and kissed his chest. “That was so much fun tonight.”

Jaime seized her mouth and walked her to the bed. Little Ian was in their room so they had to be quiet. He pushed her robe off her shoulders and kissed her neck. “Sassenach, I want ye but I’ll no be holdin yer mouth closed. Can ye be verra quiet while I love ye lass?”

She was already panting from Jaime’s hands and kisses. “Yes, quiet as a church mouse.”

Deep in the night, Claire looked over where Ian was sleeping and saw Jaime lying next to him. She wondered if Ian had woken up and surprised she did not hear him. She touched Jaime’s shoulder and
he slid under the covers spooning his wife and sighing deeply. Jaime held his love in his arms and
wanted to drift off to sleep but something was nagging him. Something was wrong. He finally got up
and jumped in his clothes then made his way to the barn.

It was an hour before dawn and he turned the barn lights on as twenty sleepy horses regarded him.
He walked each stall, turned off the lights, and walked into the other barn. Again, he walked the aisle
and when he saw Lord asshole he couldn’t believe it. The yearling, now seventeen hands high was
cast in his stall. His legs were tangled in the corral bars and they looked like he had put up quite a
fight already. Jaime immediately started talking to him, quietly, calming him down. “So, sir asshole, I
am here and I will help ye lad, dinna fash, and no thrashin about and breakin legs, Deal?” Jaime
decided it was worth a try to flip him over but he needed help.

Horses become cast in their stalls when by rolling on their backs they get trapped too close to a wall
with no room to get their legs underneath them to stand up. They are basically stuck and usually
panic. A more serious cast is when the legs are caught in corral bars with no room to extract the legs
and stand up.

Jaime called Shawn’s cell phone. “God, I’m sorry to wake ye Shawn but I have a situation with sir
asshole, he got himself cast in the stall.”

Shawn, Jaime, and Ruby looked at the yearling and all agreed to an attempt to flip the horse over
once his legs were free. It was dangerous, for them and mostly for the horse. They needed more
hands to do this quickly and limit his opportunity to thrash around with his legs tangled. Jaime took a
depth breath and called Jenny’s phone. She picked up immediately to his surprise. He explained the
problem and she sent Ian to help.

Jaime still wasn’t secure with the plan and called Vickie Anderson’s private phone. She wanted him
to Skype her so she could see the horse’s entanglement. “Jaime, how are you going to pull his legs
away from the bars so you can pull him over? No that won’t work. He is going to thrash and break a
leg, so if you don’t want to plan a funeral we need to get and strap around his middle and pull him
away.” Jaime heard noises from her phone and finally, she got back on breathing heavy. “I have a
sling, and I’m on my way.”

Claire yawned and stretched before looking for Jaime. Looking out the window she saw the barn
lights on and Vickie’s truck. She knew something was wrong. Claire saw Jenny’s light on under the
door and knocked quietly, Jenny called her in. Claire left the baby monitor with her and grabbed a
thermos to pour coffee into. She looked around for Pup and realized he would be laying next to Ian
while the humans were away. She hurried down to the barn with thermos and cups.

It was an hour before the sling was wrapped around the yearling stomach. Vickie gave him a
sedative so he wouldn’t thrash and the men started to dig under him pulling the sling as they went.
Long lines were threaded through the sling handles and everybody stopped to catch a breath and
drink coffee. When they were ready, Vickie moved them all out of the stall and put a halter and lead
on the horse. They would have to pull from the stall next to him to avoid injury when he stood up.

“This has to be fast before he can freak out we want the legs clear of the bars. Ready?”

Sir asshole let them pull him away from the bars without a fuss. Vickie was laughing at how docile
he was until he erupted and jumped to his feet with a strangled whiny. He launched his back feet at
the wall and reared with front feet lashing out.

“Stop that ye wee idiot!” Jaime was pissed and opened the stall door grabbing the lead on his halter.
Sir asshole was having none of the reprimand and tried to rear again. Jaime pulled him down and
smacked his neck hard to shock him out of his little tantrum. “Stop!” He shouted and the horse
calmed down suddenly, looking at Jaime in shock. Jaime ran his hand down his neck with a grip on his halter. He spoke quietly and led him out to the indoor arena so Vickie could check his legs safely.

Claire broke away and headed for home to make breakfast for everyone. Jenny was already getting pans hot for bacon and sausage and another pot of coffee was brewing. Claire squeezed her around the middle “I love having you here Jenny.” They worked together and fed them all a short time later.

Shawn and Ruby walked Vickie back to her truck. After a wave goodbye, Shawn kissed Ruby and asked if she would accompany him back to bed. He smiled at her hopefully and she snorted a laugh at him. “We need to start feeding and you know that Shawn!” Ruby laughed, Shawn hung his head, and both walked toward getting breakfast to hungry horses.

Later, Jaime and Ian walked out into the desert and talked about how to lash pieces of dried cactus together sturdy enough for a jump. They worked on different configurations and Jaime took notes.

“Claire’s not pregnant yet, don’t tell me ye lost interest in sex with yer wife Jaime!” Ian laughed at his best friend.

Jaime smiled and felt a warm glow in his stomach. “Ah, soon surely, when God decides it’s time I guess.”

Ian laughed, “still hidin behind the almighty I see!”

Jaime and Ian did the night feeding so Ruby could rope Shawn into putting lights on the trailer for Christmas. Shawn acted inconvenienced but he loved making Ruby happy. The trailer glowed before they were finished.

When Jaime opened the door the smell of pine and Scottish cooking filled the air. They toasted Christmas eve and he noticed Claire did not drink hers. He felt a wave of anticipation in his stomach. He knew she missed two periods and that surely meant she was pregnant. He was just going to have to tell her so. Sarah joined them for a holiday evening and they all felt grateful for the time together.

“Claire,” Jaime said quietly in her ear when they were finally in bed. “When are ye plannin to tell me about the bairn?” He ran his hands over her stomach. She spun around in his arms and held his face.

“How about now love.” He kissed her and thanked God. Another child. Jaime was dizzy with happiness and clutchted Claire to him. “I love ye Sassenach and we are blessed.”

Jenny and Ian had to return to Scotland to prepare for Hogmanay. Claire handed the baby to her and hugged her for a full minute. “Until next time, be well and know how much I will miss you.”

Jenny looked at Jaime and hugged him fiercely. “When ye deliver this one by the side of the road ye willna be scarit, do it just like the last time.” Jaime groaned and rolled his eyes. Jenny looked back at the three of them before they turned a corner and were out of sight.

September 2022

Fall showers brought the desert to life with flowering cactus and grasses that sprang up out of barren dirt. Little Ian ran across the desert floor and looked back at his father and baby sister sleeping in a sling against his chest. “Da! Come ere… nake!”

Jaime’s head whipped up toward his son and he started running scooping him up and putting a good twenty feet between them and the snake. “Snake ye say?” Ian shook his head and pointed toward a rock. Jaime picked him up and his sister whimpered at the sharing her father’s chest. Jaime walked slowly giving the snake a wide birth. He peered under the rock and surely saw the scaled reptile. He walked toward home and planned to come back and find the thing without so much liability in his
Ian ran into the kitchen, “Mommy, nake!” Pointing outside with big energy.

Claire looked up at Jaime with a stricken face and pulled her son into her arms.

“It’s alright mo chridhe, if you could take the little darlin I’ll be goin back to get the beastie.”

She pulled her daughter out of the sling and whispered her questions to Jaime, rapid fire. “Did it have a rattle? How big is it? What color is it? Should we look it up first?” Jaime kissed her quickly before she could ask any more.

Claire ran upstairs with the children and grabbed the binoculars. She had to hang out of the window to see Jaime and Shawn with a barrel, a long crop, and one glove. “Jesus Christ, that’s not enough!” Little Ian started to cry and he hugged Pup to him. “Mamma scared.” Then he wailed in fear.

Claire came in from the window and sat on the floor with him. He melted into her and cried feeling the fear from his mother and not understanding the gravity of the threat. Claire rocked him and spoke quietly, telling him his big strong da would kill the snake and not to worry.

Jaime was ready with one gloved hand to grab the snake just behind the head and throw it into the barrel. Shawn poked at it but it didn’t want to move. As he was going in for another poke the snake lunged at him and both men jumped back. Before the thing could get back under his rock Shawn grabbed it mid-body and as the snake’s head was coming around he threw it into the barrel. “Didna have a rattle.”

Once settled, Ian was off to play with his toys downstairs and Claire peeked out the window and saw the men coming back laughing. She sighed with relief. The baby was stretching and grunting on her bed and she scooped up her little love and kissed her face with a big smile. “Good morning my sweetheart.”

Little Faith Ellen Fraser was born on August eighth, 2022. Unlike her brother, she was not sure she wanted to face the world and made her mother work for her birth. Claire labored for ten hours before the final push and squalling new baby signaled an end to her struggle. Jamie was so undone by then he could only hold Claire’s hand and pray. When the nurse handed the baby to him he was spellbound. Claire watched him stare at his beautiful daughter, so tiny, with a shock of red hair. He laid the lass at her mother's side and helped Claire nurse her daughter for the first time.

Claire heard some commotion and looked up in time to see the nurse pull Jaime into the Lazy-boy and push his head between his knees. “Jaime!” The nurse put a cuff on him and took his blood pressure. She asked another nurse to bring some juice, and Jaime’s color slowly came back.

It was the same nurse who attended their first birth and they were so glad to see her. They couldn’t have known she pulled seniority to get switched to the Fraser birth causing quite the upset in maternity that night. She took Jaime’s blood pressure one more time and watched as he couldn’t take his eyes of mother and child. “You’re back to normal Mr. Fraser.”

Jaime had not slept much as Claire’s time grew closer. He was constantly around her until she asked him to go do something. At night he would leap out of bed if Claire just turned over. He saw birth as a life and death struggle now, after delivering Ian on the side of the road. He was tortured with it. When Claire’s labor and pain continued for so long all he could do is hold her hand and pray.

He pulled the chair close to the bed and Claire cupped his cheek. “Are you alright love?” The nurse turned around and smiled.
Claire sat in the glider and put Faith to her breast. She was only nine weeks old but Claire could see her personality already. Quiet, happy, and watching. Unlike Ian who wanted to lead and be heard from the beginning. A marvelous manifestation of mixing DNA and a random outcome. Claire ran her fingers through the soft red baby hair that curled on the ends. She had piercing blue eyes like her father and deep dimples when she yawned. We’ll see more of those when you start talking, she thought.

Jaime walked in the victor with Ian on his shoulders. “The snake is gone mo chridhe.” He tipped Ian toward the bed and let him bounce, squealing with laughter. Pup was giving Jaime the side eye and sniffed Ian protectively.

They chatted about the annual paint festival they were hosting this weekend. One weekend each year they hosted a party and supplied food and drink to all the boarders who came to paint. The barns and fences around the arenas were painted as well as the field jumps to brighten their colors after the baking summer. Jaime hired a professional painter as well and whatever was left at the end of the day the team finished. Jaime wanted the borders to have pride in the barn and he wanted an excuse to say thank you.

The next order of business was their annual show coming up in three weeks. Registration for events had started one week ago and Jaime was very excited at the number of entries already. The show was pulling people from California, Nevada, and New Mexico. Jaime offered a fifty percent discount on next month’s board for anyone who agreed to pasture their horse for the two-day event. All of the posse riders agreed as well as many others.

The horse trial would feature eventing, dressage, and hunter jumpers. The team spent many hours getting the field ready and it looked spectacular. The big trees were finally looking better and growing. It took Shawn’s ingenuity to suggest deep water retention troughs at each tree to catch the abundant run-off of rain from the mountain. Shawn lined the deep holes with plastic to limit loss leaving an eight-inch strip open to the dirt and closest to the roots. The holes were covered with grating and the trees were showing new growth.

This show would be the debut of Shawn’s Snap Fence. At long last, they had won a patent not on the fence sections but on the design of the hardware that snapped the sections and gave the fence rigidity. It was a brilliant design and when the prototype was installed Jaime just shook his head at how clever it was. Shawn had worked hard for the patent but didn’t have a clue what to do next. Jaime suggested limiting his risk and encouraged Shawn to take orders as they came in. He planned to build a workshop for Shawn if he wanted to pursue manufacturing the fences. Shawn was family now and that meant full support.

Ruby was busy getting the last two paintings done so she could add them to the gallery set up at the show. Last year, she got six orders at five hundred a piece and was busy for six months painting. She kept her studio at Sarah’s house because there was no room at the trailer. Sarah didn’t mind, she loved having Ruby around and they would talk for hours as she worked. There were a few nights Ruby could not stop and Shawn would sack out on her old bed. Sarah would wake to both of them raiding her frig for a piece of cheese or fruit to eat on the way to work. They would both kiss her cheek before running for the door.

Claire laid Faith in the cradle and covered her. Jaime informed her that Ian was down for his nap. He kissed her deeply and suggested she have a nice nap with him while it was quiet.

“That wasn’t a nap kiss I’ll have you know. Come on, tell me what you really want or skip the talk and kiss me again.” He did just that.
Chapter 52

2023
Jaime laid on the sofa in his study and threw a ball at the wall. He heard the front door open and was filled with excitement to see the kids for the first time today. He scooped Faith up in her damp bathing suit and gave her monster kisses on her stomach while she squealed with delight. Ian was putting their pool toys away and ran back to say hello to his da. Jaime kissed Claire and looked in her eyes.

Would you be so kind and accompany me this evening for a walk?

Claire looked at him, wondering what this was about. “Sure, let me get my clothes on, be right down.”

The kids stayed in their swimsuits and the Frasers followed da on a walk. He led them across the street and up a dirt road, a couple of turns, and stopped. “Well, how do ye like it Sassenach?”

“Like what? All I see is desert.”

Jaime turned her around and she saw the entire Equestrian Center and she could even see Sarah’s house. “Wow, it’s like being on top of the world.”

Jaime was so excited he just blurted it out. “Let’s buy it and build the new house here!”

“I don’t see a for sale sign.” Claire was feeling nervous excitement building in her stomach. They had looked for a house or property for three months and found nothing suitable. This was absolutely perfect. Best of all, she could see the whole mountain range. “Jaime, don’t tease me, is it for sale?”

Jaime kissed her and with sparkling eyes said yes. Dougal knows someone who knows someone who is selling. It’s not listed yet and Dougal is trying to arrange the sale without using a real estate agent. He looked out at the property, “it’s perfect.”

2024
Claire pulled out another box and taped the bottom. Ruby was helping keep the kids busy while Claire finished the packing. Poor Ruby was three months pregnant and throwing up every other minute it seemed. She and Shawn would be moving into this house right away and Ruby was so excited to get out of the trailer.

Jaime was doing the final walk-through inspection and they hoped to be moving the boxes over soon. “I have room for one more Claire.” Rupert stood waiting for another box to take to the truck.

They heard the front door open and a loud whoop from Jaime. He ran up the stairs and pulled Claire to her feet kissing her with delight. "It’s fit to live in mo chridhe. I’ll fill the other truck with the boxes downstairs."

Later, after an exhausting day of moving into the new house, Claire walked from room to room marveling at the space, the technology, the height of the ceiling, and most of all, the wall of windows that faced the mountain. It would be their home forever, she couldn’t think of any reason she would give up that view.

The great room was open with a round central fireplace in the middle of the room. It had a natural stone ledge around if and Claire would put stools around it eventually. The flooring was hardwood planks and southwestern area rugs. They would fill the room with large stuffed sofas and chairs for comfort.
She walked towards the kid's rooms on the other side of the rambling ranch very happy they had both fallen asleep in their new rooms. There was a guest room for Jenny and Ian with a private bath. She wandered back passing the entertainment room with a huge flat screen and theater sound, four Lazy-boy chairs and a couch. She passed the study with twenty-foot bookshelves and a sliding ladder for the upper levels. Large flat monitors were on the wall giving a live feed of the barn cameras. They kept Jaime’s desk but she needed to get a sofa for when he needed to think or nap.

On this side of the house was their master suite and it was her favorite place. The room was very large with two walk-in closets that included chairs and mirrors, built-in cabinets and shoe storage. Hers had a second door leading into the bathroom with marble vanity tops and floors, a large Jacuzzi tub, glassed-in shower and huge windows that faced the desert. She didn’t want to cover them but the first sign of a hiker would change her mind. There was a monitor installed on the wall so they could watch the barns or any other camera they wanted. Star was about to foal again so they would leave her camera up with audio so they could monitor her. She fell back on the bed and realized how tired and sore she was. With her eyes closed, she smiled wickedly. Time to try out the new tub.

Jaime was walking back after helping Shawn move their bed and dresser over. Ruby cried when she saw the big rocker with a bow on it. Claire was leaving it for her and the new baby when it came. His phone buzzed a message. “Dougal! Jesus Christ, wait till Claire reads this.” He opened the front door and felt immense pride in the home they designed and he wondered how long it would take to get used to all of it. He poked his head in the kitchen and looked in on the kids. Coming back he smiled to himself and grabbed the whisky and glasses.

Their room was heavy with the scent of Claire’s favorite aromatherapy bubble bath. The lights were low and candles were burning around the tub. Jaime walked quietly and watched her, eyes closed, hair piled on her head. She was a vision. “Would the lady like a whisky?”

Claire smiled up at him. “There is plenty of room for another person, even someone as big as you.”

Jaime pressed a glass into her hand. “I have to test the shower mo chridhe. Besides, that hot bath would pull my last reserve of energy and I can’t have that.”

She watched his naked body in the shower and admired how beautiful he was, muscular arms and back, thick legs, flat stomach, and that face, it still stole her breath when she looked at it. She was ready to show him her love and dried off bringing candles to the bedside tables. Jaime installed a gas fireplace in their bedroom and she turned it on. It was beautiful with the lights off. She turned down the bedding and rubbed her favorite lotion into her skin.

“I’ll finish for ye.” Jaime took the lotion and kneeled in front of her. He smoothed the lotion up each leg and around her heels. As his hands worked higher on her thighs Claire was breathing deeply and watching his hands. He pushed the robe off her shoulders and gently pressed her to the bed. He massaged her arms, chest, and stomach. Then he set the lotion aside and laid beside her. Claire was so overwhelmed with his touch, their house, his gorgeous face, and the promise of sweet passionate love. “I am your slave tonight Jaime. I will do anything you say, just how you like it.”

He smiled down at his love. “I want hot kisses from ye.” He crushed her mouth and felt her tongue invade his mouth. Jaime groaned and held her tightly. When she broke the kiss they were both panting. “Anything I want ye say.” He twisted her nipple making her gasp. Then flipped so he was laying at her feet. “I want to feel ye tongue Sassenach.”

Claire brought her mouth right above him and hovered there building his tension before she touched him with his lips. It was working. Jaime was nearly panting when she wrapped her mouth around him and pushed him into her mouth until he banged against the back of her throat. She felt Jaime grab her hips and pull her over his face and lower her to his tongue. The intensity of this position
made her groan and almost swallow him. She felt like an electric buzz was coursing through her body.

Jaime put her back on the bed and pulled her shoulders up to look at him. “I love every single ounce of ye Claire. Come outside with me.”

Claire was shaking her head at the change in venue, trying to keep up with her husband when what she wanted to do is come, by any means necessary, and right now.

Jaime pulled her through the doors of glass that led out to a private patio and a double lounge bed. He laid her down and kissed her from mouth to navel. “Open yer legs Sassenach.”

Claire felt a bit exposed at first but then realized it was nothing but raw desert out there and she relaxed into this exquisite lounge. Jaime teased her with his tongue until she held his head against her body and begged him to finish her. She fell into a wild and warm storm of nerve endings dancing and her core muscles in spasm.

Jaime was on top of her waiting. He kissed her neck and told her how sexy she was. When she opened her eyes she felt the exquisite intrusion and knew the neanderthal was present. She wanted what he wanted. She felt excited with anticipation. She didn’t see this side of Jaime often, he was too much of a gentleman. But when his arousal got the better of him she saw his carnal lust and brutish love and it thrilled her. He moved in and out of her like he was in a sexual trance. He held her body how it suited him and rammed her without mercy. He slowed down and pushed into her depths pressing into her and holding her legs out far apart. He watched as her body stretched around his deep intrusion and he saw her pulsing bud.

Claire watched in silence and rapt attention. Her own heat building just by watching him. He thrust into her and pushed her knees down to the lounge. He ground into her making her gasp, almost in pain but exquisite throbbing. He continued his assault until Claire screamed into her orgasm and Jaime thrust into her again and again until he went rigid with his own flight into ecstasy.

When his body came to rest he dropped down next to her and kissed her face, neck, and chest. He wrapped himself around her and sighed with pleasure. Before he fell asleep he pointed the remote at the monitor and saw Shawn coming out of the barn after checking Star.

In the pitch dark of their room he realized how far he had come from that first year living alone in a barn set on dirt. His dreams came true in a big way but he never planned this. His own happiness wasn’t planned because he didn’t know what it would look like. How could he ever know what true love would be like? He smiled in the dark and held her closer. His Sassenach changed everything and his world was brighter and more colorful than he could have guessed. The Sassenach made him a better man in a bigger world where anything was possible. He realized he hadn’t told her about Dougal’s gift. He better tell her first thing tomorrow so she can figure out where to build the pool.

2025
Claire looked at her son across the table and encouraged him to eat before the bus came. Ian looked at her with a mixture of excitement and fear. “What if no one likes me there? What if the teacher is mean?”

Claire looked at him with compassion. “Everyone on the bus will be new to the school. They will all feel just like you do. So just find a seat next to someone and say hello. It will make you both feel
better.”

The front door closed and Jaime walked into the kitchen. “Are ye ready son? I’m excited for ye and I’ll wait for the bus with ye, let’s go!” Jaime wrapped an arm around Claire and gave a squeeze. Give yer mam a kiss.”

Ian reached his arms up to his mother and Claire bent down to kiss him goodbye on this big day. She hugged him and told him to have fun as she struggled to push back the tears. When the door closed behind her husband and son she gave in and cried. Kindergarten, already? How did this happen so fast? She took a deep breath and sighed, pushing herself to get dressed. She had a big ride with Jag this morning.

When Jaime left to run errands he parked at the school and watched for Ian. It didn’t take long to see his son smiling and laughing with a group of boys playing with a ball. He felt immense relief and smiled at his goofy kid as he drove away. He needed to get home and take Faith so Claire could ride the course with the newly reopened desert section.

Jaime laid on the floor and played with Faith’s dolls trying to mimic her movements. She looked up with her big blue eyes, curly red hair and smiled at her father showing her deep dimples. “Let’s go watch yer mam ride!” Faith held her arms up to Jaime and perched comfortably on his hip. They stood in the driveway and watched Claire’s flawless round. Jaime wanted to experience it with her and walked to the barn looking for Ruby. Instead, he found Rupert and gave him a child for the next hour.

Jaime got Donus ready quickly and had him tacked up when Claire walked Jag down the aisle. “Sassenach, how were the course and addition?” She gushed about how fun it was with a lively smile. “Care to do a team round?”

Claire looked at Donus all tacked up and ready and she jumped up and down with excitement. “Yes! Wait, who is leading?”

Jaime looked at her like she should know such things and led Donus out of the stall.

Claire walked Jag until Donus was warmed up. Her heart rate shot up with excitement when Jaime signaled. One by one the team wandered out to the fence to watch. Even Faith was glued to her parents riding big horses very fast.

Jaime pointed Donus the course and Jag kept up without a problem. They flew over the fences, down through the shade of the big trees and through the groves. Each fence was a thrill because Jaime chose the most difficult heights and angles. They raced across the field pulling gasps out of the onlookers. Donus jumped into the water and Claire almost bit her lip at the height Jaime chose, but she followed with courage and laughed when they jumped out of the water. “Good boy Jag, now go!” They sailed over the boundary fence into the desert and Claire felt like she was flying. The jumps came so fast that she barely had time to get off Jag’s back before his feet were lifting over another object. They came barreling back up the steep incline with the chicken coop and ditch jumps and finally galloped across the finish line. They raced past the onlookers and slowed the horses laughing hysterically.

Rupert looked at Faith, “ye see lass, ye were born to it. I sure hope ye like jumpin at a gallop.”

Angus clocked them at 480 meters per minute. He smiled and shook his head.

Jamie and Claire walked their horses into the barn like they were the only two people on earth. He kissed her over and over again while they walked the pasture and now he just smiled. “We need to
do that again sometime mo chridhe.”

Angus ran out of the barn and gave the whistle. Jaime jerked his head up and quickened his step. Claire followed. “The lass is down and pushin Jaime!”

They got the horses put up and ran to check Star. She was definitely pushing already and Jaime was worried about the way she looked. He called Vickie who was thankfully close by and pulling up eight minutes later.

“The foal has turned since last week Jaime. I have to turn it back or she won’t be able to push it out. She’s baring down so I have to work fast. Claire, come in here and sit at her head to keep her calm. This won’t be pleasant for her.”

Claire sat near Star’s head and cooed to her, running her hand down her neck while Vickie reached her arm into the mare and felt for legs. Star was not liking the intrusion and Claire put her forehead against hers and spoke quietly. “It won’t be long sweetheart, I promise. You’re such a brave mother.”

Vickie grunted and pulled her arm out. “Okay, I was able to pull it into the birthing position so let’s hope Star makes short work of this.” Vickie looked worried and Jaime noticed. They waited. After thirty minutes Vickie went to her truck and came back with a huge hypodermic needle. “Let’s give her…” Star pulled up and was bearing down before Vickie could finish her sentence. Vickie dropped down to assist her and ten minutes later a wet baby was blinking at everyone. Star stood up and licked the new baby seeming not to notice all the people in her stall. After multiple tries, the filly stood up on wobbly legs and reached for her mother’s milk. There was a collective “awe” and Jaime felt a huge relief. Three successful births from Star, thank Christ, he thought, and thank Gellis.

Claire looked up at Faith in Rupert’s arms and climbed out of the stall to take her. “That’s a lot of excitement for you young lady. Shall we go wait for your brother?” She locked eyes with Jaime and for a long minute, it was just the two of them. She smiled and turned to walk out of the barn.
Chapter 53

2030
“Da, there's one.” Ian pointed at a suitcase coming down the carousel and Jaime grabbed it.

“Ye should hunt with vision like that.” He grabbed another and helped Ian with a third.

Claire was almost undone by a ten-hour flight with children that didn’t want to sleep. They were both so excited to be in Scotland during the summer, this would only be the second time. Claire and Jaime loved the summers too but usually opted for Christmas either in Scotland or Arizona. Right now she didn’t care what season it was as long as there was whisky served and soon.

Jaime signaled a porter to load up the suitcases and off they went to look for Jenny and Ian. Every time he walked this airport he saw her bright brown eyes in the crowd like they were a beacon. He smiled and saw the eyes crinkle and get red with tears.

Claire felt someone grab her hand and looked up at Ian’s smile. “I didn’t see you standing right in front of me!” When Jaime let go of Jenny Claire threw her arms around her sister in law. The happy group made their way to two vehicles and Faith asked if she could ride with Aunt Jenny and Uncle Ian.

Jaime walked around the BMW and whistled. “Who’d ye steal this from Ian? It even smells new.”

“Well, it is new so if he hit somethin just drive back to America and send me a check,” he was smiling and full of pride in that car.

The two vehicles pulled into the driveway thirty minutes later without a scratch on either. To Claire’s delight a great bottle of whisky came out and four glasses poured. They toasted twice and Claire smiled with the warmth spreading through her stomach. The kids were outside before the second glass was poured and they would be out exploring for the rest of the day. Wee Jaime and little Ian were four years apart without a lot in common but wee Jaime led him into the woods for an adventure that both boys enjoyed.

Jaime and Ian walked outside to enjoy the summer day at a cool seventy-five degrees. Jaime took a deep breath and almost lost it, coughing to cover his spontaneous emotions.

“Don’t hide it from me brother, I ken ye better than ye ken yerself. That is just homesickness ye pushed back on for so many years. It’s the summer, that brings up memories, aye? A band of boys that jumped over gorges, stole fruit, camped without a tent, helped each other with chores so we could get back to the woods and just have fun. Aye. Great memories of summer Jaime.”

Claire and Jenny sat outside and watched the girls get reacquainted and play. Claire loved the change in Faith when they were in Scotland, no matter the season. It was like she was in her element and happy to the bone. Claire didn’t hear a “mom!” for the rest of the afternoon.

Lallybroch was well set up for large family meals and Jenny’s new gourmet kitchen was such fun to work in. Jenny and Claire fell into their synchronized cooking and the evening meal was a banquet with children talking nonstop, mostly to each other. The minute their bellies were full they were out the kitchen door again.

Jaime raised his glass and toasted Ian, for what he would soon learn. “This is to ye Ian, but ye canna drink until we ken what yer being toasted for.”
Ian blushed and looked at his plate. Jenny smiled wide and announced that Ian was promoted to CEO of the accounting firm. The youngest to ever hold the position. She beamed at her husband.

Jaime and Claire knew it was his future because he had been groomed for this since first meeting the old man who owned the firm. He worked Ian the hardest and promised a bright future leading the firm one day.

“I got a call on a Saturday last month, the old man had a heart attack. I was there every day and he looked fine to me maybe a week later but he decided he was done workin. He said facin your own mortality changes a man and it was time for him to spoil the wife for a change.”

Ian never expected this promotion so soon. He loved the old man like the father he missed. He handed a shocked Ian the reins along with an income that rocked his world. The BMW and kitchen remodel would not hurt them financially.

Claire was wiping tears off her face and hugged them both. She was so happy for them. Jaime and Ian continued to toast each other getting louder with more laughter after each shot. Jenny and Claire cleaned up dishes and put food away. When they caught each other yawning they would both blush and laugh.

The children were so exhausted from the outside play they were fast asleep as soon as their mothers herded them upstairs to the bedrooms. Claire hugged Jenny goodnight and fell into Jaime’s old bed exhausted. Sometime later she woke up to something banging into the dresser. She sat up and squinted at Jaime’s body moving through the dark. She turned on the light beside her and eyed her drunk husband.

“Sassenach! Yer here! I’m sae glad mo chridhe! Ye must come with me we’re going for a walk!” He turned around and face planted one of the thick posts of the bed. “Ah, Christ a’mighty! Who put that there?”

Claire did her best not to laugh but that was too much. While lost in her giggles she went to him and helped him undress. He fought her as much as a drunk Jaime could but she managed to strip him down to his jeans.

“I want to go outside with ye Claire. He rubbed his face on hers, “I want to make love under the moonlight,” he swayed with her sighing, “with ye.”

“I am honored and very excited but how will I get you back into the house when you pass out in the fields?” Before he could protest she kissed him deeply. If you can stay conscious while I put you in my mouth, I will go.”

“Ah, ha, Sassenach, it’s a deal!” He grabbed her and fell on the bed while Claire struggled out of his arms and peeled his jeans off. She was amazed at the size of his erection and felt his hand grab her hair and push her face to his groin. She couldn’t be this close to him, this intimate, without feeling her heat stir. She pressed him into her warm mouth and expected him to pass out at any moment. He didn’t and right before he climaxed he grabbed Claire and pulled her above his face where he assaulted her body with tongue and fingers making her grab the bedpost to steady herself. She was thrown into the vortex at top speed and Jaime put his hand over her mouth and sucked on her nipple.

“Jesus Christ” she whispered before he yanked her off the bed and bent her over. He was panting in her ear, “not even he can save ye now Sassenach.” He thrust into her like a rutting bull holding her against him by her hair and pushing her legs apart with his feet. His hands were everywhere, stimulating her to crash into him and drive him deeper into her body. Jaime felt her inner muscles grab him like a hand and he pounded into her until he buried himself in her body and rode the
Claire scrambled up on the bed and looked at Jaime’s smug face. “Ye see Sassenach, ye coulda made yer wee noises if we were outside.” He smiled down at her and nearly lost his balance.

“Get in this bed this instant, and I don’t make wee noises!” she whispered.

Jaime laid on his stomach and looked at her with drunk puppy love eyes. “Aye, ye do.”

Claire loved those eyes and tried to rally her indignation but Jaime had passed out cold. She pushed the hair out of his face and covered him. “Goodnight sweet prince.” Claire turned off the light and snuggled into Jaime who always moved into her. He didn’t and Claire grabbed his wrist to check for a pulse. Satisfied that he only looked dead she drifted off to sleep.

A rooster announced a new day loud enough to make Claire bolt upright in bed. With her hand on her chest, she tried to breathe through the adrenaline that was rushing through her heart. Jaime had not moved a muscle all night and Claire couldn’t snuggle back to sleep so she gave up and dressed for an early morning ride.

Having some coffee in her stomach she walked to the door and heard Jenny’s voice behind her. “Do ye want some company? I know some very cool places but ye have to take me with ye.” Claire’s smile was a super-sized yes and Jenny ran upstairs to get dressed. They stumbled out the kitchen door into the dark, trying to keep their giggling quiet. Once in the barn, they were all business and Jenny put the tack on her horse and cinched it up. Claire watched but it was too intricate for her memory at this time of the morning.

They walked the horses toward the fields until they were out of earshot and Jenny let out a whoop and took off with Claire trying to follow without much luck.

“No, no, no, no, sister. If ye keep crashin into the front of that saddle ye won’t have sex for a month. Here look at me.” Jenny leaned back in the huge saddle and her legs were straight out in front, almost to the horse’s shoulder. Ye sit this saddle with the fleshy part of yer butt and ye have to use one hand on them reins or the horse won’t know where ye want him to go.” She tied the reins in a knot and put it in one of Claire’s hands. “This other hand is for makin ye look like a cowgirl, look here.” She gave Claire her best cowgirl pose and watched as Claire made the attempt. Jenny rolled her eyes and kicked the horse with all her might loping away from a confused Claire. Jenny stayed within eyeshot of Claire but she loved to lope through the fields and couldn’t help herself. It didn’t take long for Claire to lope up beside her and the two celebrated the dawn.

When they walked the horses back Claire asked Jenny about the family Bibles in the attic and recounted what Jamie had read about another Jaime Fraser from the 1700s.

“I’ve read most of them and seems to me there’s been a Jaime Fraser almost every generation. Names tend to stay in families in Scotland, unlike America where names have to be unique. Some of the Bibles have extensive writing about the family members. Yer welcome to look up there but it’s a fair amount of dust ye’ll be breathin.”

Later, when the kids were outside for the day, Jaime and Ian were sleeping off hangovers, Jenny took Claire to the attic. It was a fascinating collection of antique furniture going back hundreds of years. Jenny handed her a Bible and pointed at three others in that century. Jenny opened a window and bid Claire happy reading.

Claire’s heart was beating fast as she opened the book and started reading. She looked at the family tree and the dates of birth but Jaime said this person fought at Culloden Moor in the 1946 uprising
against the British. She had the wrong Bible.

Once again she settled with the big Bible in her lap and started reading. An hour later, Jenny brought her a glass of lemon aid. An hour after that, Jaime came up the stairs looking slightly green. He sat next to her on the floor and she read out loud while they both got lost in the story. He and his wife lived here at Lallybroch until Jaime was called to rally the troops for the bony prince Charles. They left together in 1745 to seek troops and support from their Grand Sire. Jaime returned after the uprising nearly dead from his wounds. His wife was not seen again. I think the writer was his sister. “Jaime is on death’s door,” she read. “He has not spoken or regained consciousness in seven days. I’ve called for the priest.” Claire continued to read and the two of them were lost in the story.

“There was a price on his head for being a traitor. I remember reading that,” Jaime said, anxious to hear about the cave. Ten more minutes of reading about his miraculous recovery, Claire read how the man was forced to live alone in a cave at the property boundary. High in the granite outcrop that can be seen when looking up from the North side of the tower,” she read.

Jaime was on his feet pulling Claire up. “I know where the old tower was, let’s go!” They accepted lunch in a basket from Jenny, or rather, Claire did. Jaime was calling her from outside.

“Here, put some water bottles in there. It’s quite a climb.”

“Have you seen it Jenny?”

“No one I know has ever found it, but I know the vicinity of where it’s said to be. Just be careful.”

Claire was psyched for the adventure and caught up with Jaime who took the basket from her. They wandered higher and higher into the woods staying close to the outcropping. They walked for two hours and Claire called a time out. “I can’t move another foot without some food and water.” Jaime led her to a huge boulder of granite where they could sit in the sun and rest. They looked down on the estate and saw the children playing.

Claire laid back on the rock enjoying her full stomach and the sun on her face. Jaime rubbed her leg deep in contemplation. She looked at his color and decided this adventure was just what his hangover needed. She smiled to herself remembering crazy love the night before.

“That look on yer face Sassenach might put an end to our mission. It’s making me weak to see it mo ghaol.”

Claire sat up and kissed him deeply. “You were magnificent last night my love.”

“I was?” He had no memory and Claire wanted to hit him with the basket.

“Well, it’s my memory and it was hot. Are you ready to continue?”

They pressed on but she caught Jaime looking inward instead of out at the woods several times. Jaime stopped and walked toward the outcropping, thinking he found it. Disappointed, they pressed on for another hour until Claire saw a huge rock that looked just like their picnic site. Jaime led her to it and sat her down.

“Now Claire, I canna think of anythin else. What say you give me the details of our hot night.” He pulled her close and kissed her neck and mouth, running his hands up her leg.

Claire was giggling and fighting him off when suddenly her breath caught. “Jaime, does that look like the entrance to a cave?”
“Christ, it does!” They were on their feet walking toward the granite. Jaime held her hand as he pressed into the entrance. To continue they had to duck down and crawl but then it opened up again and it was definitely a cave. He reached into the basket for two flashlights and they continued their search. The cave opened up to an area roughly ten by ten feet. Jaime had to stoop because the ceiling was only five and a half feet or so. There was a circle of rocks that were carbon stained by fire and still had the burnt logs from the last use. They sat down and talked about the warrior Jaime Fraser living here for months to keep his family safe and avoid hanging. “The Bible said he eventually gave himself up so his family could collect the bounty. I couldn’a find another mention of the man after that.” Jaime pulled out a flask his thoughtful sister had packed and they toasted Jaime Fraser.

Jaime grew quiet after that and Claire thought they should head back before they lost the sunlight to find their way. She wanted out of the cave. There was an overwhelming feeling of despair in it and she wondered if Jaime felt it too. When they emerged into the sunlight they both felt better but Jaime had lost his interest in a granite top romp. Coming down the mountain was much harder than going up Claire soon realized, and she was exhausted when they finally walked into the kitchen.

The adults started the evening with a whisky and Jaime held Claire’s eyes for a long minute. Later, when they laid in bed, Jaime explained the feeling he had in the cave and how he knew that was what Jaime felt during his time there. “Life was hard back then and he had fought in two wars, but to give yerself up knowin ye would be hanged.” Jaime held Claire close. “I can only hope I would be man enough to do the same.” He kissed the top of Claire’s head and they settled in to sleep. Claire knew sleep would not come easy for Jaime tonight.

The day before they were set to go home, Claire could not find little Ian. She, Jenny, and big Ian were scattered over the property looking for him. Jaime looked through the house and asked himself, where would I be at that age?” He climbed the steps to the attic and there was his son, reading the Bibles and seeing the adventures in his head. Jaime whistled out the window and waved when Jenny looked up. Then he sat next to his son on the floor and patiently waited.

“I don’t want to go back da.” His voice was shaking as he pushed back the tears. “I want to live here in Scotland where kids can play outside, and it snows. I hate living in America.” He lost the battle with the tears and Jaime’s heart was breaking.

“Yer a bit young for a move like that Ian. I ken what it feels like to have yer heart pulled by the Highlands so ye still hear em calling to ye, even from home. It’s a powerful force mac gradhach and soon ye might make the decision to stay here. But, yer mam and me would be too lonely without ye and so would Faith. We need a few more years with ye. Ian was crying with his head down. “Tell da what it is ye love so much.”

Ian came alive talking about walking in the woods with Jaime’s friends. “We all just started walking, no one was watching us or telling us to stay. We walked for hours da, and I had no idea where we were. I was getting scared. Then I looked up and saw Lallybroch. Jaime told me to always keep the ravine on the same side of me so when I turned back it would be on the other side and lead me home. It was so cool da! We pulled apples off a tree and sat down and ate them. It was amazing. Then a dog came out of nowhere and played with us, it even followed us for a while before it ran off. Ian was smiling up at his father and Jaime knew exactly what he was talking about.

“Yes, that sounds like fun Ian and there’s nothin like that at home, is there.” Ian shook his head. “This is a big deal mo mhac. It’s not something we can ignore.” Ian looked up hopefully at his father. “Yer one-fourth of this family Ian, that’s too big a piece to do without. Dinna fash, I will speak with yer mam and find a solution. Maybe spendin the summer here would give ye some peace at home during the school year.” Ian’s head shot up and he smiled at Jaime nodding his head. “Come, let’s go make excuses for our absence and give ye more time in the woods.”
Jaime walked Claire outside and saw Faith holding hands with Maggie, Jenny’s seven-year-old daughter. The two of them were like magnets to each other. He smiled and thought a trade might be in the making.

On their last night, they built a bonfire and roasted hot dogs on a stick and ate corn on the cob pulled right out from the fire. Later it was marshmallows and ghost stories until late in the evening. The adults toasted with whisky and took turns scaring the pants off the kids. Claire leaned against Jaime and laughed at the stories thinking they were more comedy than ghostly. The children fell asleep with full bellies and a memory to cherish. Faith and Maggie held hands, even in sleep.
Pup

The Frasers made their way back to their house on the hill after another exhausting flight. Claire was so tired she just wanted to strip, shower, and sleep for a week. Jaime had pulled in all the luggage and took a deep breath as the front door closed.

When they were home at night, anyone caring to look would know this because the outside lights would burn bright. Claire waited for Sarah’s call that Pup was on his way. She looked at her phone to make sure it was on then started throwing dirty clothes into a pile on her floor. She was able to keep up with laundry at Jenny’s house so it wouldn’t be too hard to get everything put back in place.

She should have been buried under a dog by now and wondered where Pup was. She walked toward the front door as the bell rang and she pulled it open with her knee’s bent, waiting. The door flew open to her best friend’s eyes and Claire looked down and around for Pup.

“Claire, honey, if I could take this pain from you I would.” Sarah’s arms came around her and Claire heard the tears in her voice.

“What?” Claire felt an icy hand grip her stomach so tight she couldn’t breathe. She looked at Sarah crying and said the only word in her head, “what?”

Jaime came around the corner and pulled up short when he saw Sarah, and Claire crumpling in front of her. He held onto Claire and looked questioningly at Sarah.

He has been waiting for you Claire. He wants to say goodbye so you must come. Claire looked up at Jaime with a white stricken face. “Bring Ian, please…” and she was gone.

Sarah explained Pup had a stroke while the family had just taken off from Edinburg airport. He was outside and could not get up. Vickie came as soon as she was called and worried about the heat as well as moving him. She set up an IV to keep him hydrated and checked him two more times through the day. Shawn and Rupert built a quick structure to keep the sun off of him and pulled Jaime’s window air conditioner out to him on an extension cord. Ruby sat with him throughout the day and kept a wet towel over him.

Sarah prayed to let her two friends say goodbye before God took him. They all prayed that Claire would make it in time and Pup held on.

Claire ran through Sarah’s house and saw the wooden structure. She ran to him calling his name and pushed the wood away dropping down so he could see her. His tail thumped when she covered him in kisses and his front legs moved to try to touch her. She knew he was leaving her so she pulled him into her lap and held him so he could see her.

Sarah watched the reunion and thanked God for his mercy and grace. Pup was in the arms of his most loved, and she would hand him to God.

Ian held onto his mother and kissed Pup over and over. He cried so hard and Pup cried too. Claire held them both and rocked soothingly. Jaime brought out a large ottoman and pushed it up against Claire’s back so she could lean against it. She sighed with relief.

Ian hugged Pup, “thank you for saving me from that coyote, you are so brave.”

“Ian, what coyote?” Claire looked at him and Ian dissolved in tears telling her he broke the rules and
walked past the boundary line into the desert. He knew he would get into trouble so he didn’t tell them that two coyotes were suddenly walking around him and growling. Claire’s heart rate shot up seeing it in her mind. “Pup ran up to one barking and showing his teeth. He crashed into it and ran after the other one. He chased them away and ran back to me. We ran home and I never told. Thank you Pup.” In Claire’s mind, she held Pup’s heart and thanked him.

Jaime spent a moment with Claire and Pup and felt a loss for words. He would never forget his new love pulling him out from under a bush. He shook his head, he needed to be strong and couldn’t think of such things. He stood with Sarah at the back door and looked at them. “It’s how they started when she loved him back to life. It seems the circle completes itself and I don’t know how to help her or him.”

“I think they are both where they need to be for this. I say let them be.” Sarah walked them to the door and Jaime left with two sad children. On the way home, he spoke his heart in Gaelic and looked up at the dark sky. “Please bless your servant Pup and guard Claire’s heart so it doesna brake completely. Two souls that are kindred, let her feel your presence when ye take him.” It was Jaime’s iron will that kept his tears at bay so he could be the strength they all needed.

Claire dozed with tears streaming down her cheeks. She felt Pup’s tongue on her cheek and opened her eyes. The dawn was breaking and she looked up at the rays shooting out from the peaks of the mountain. She looked down into the softest, most loving eyes. “Thank you for everything Pup. For loving me and the children, Ruby, Jaime, Sarah. You have been my constant best friend and I love your heart.” She kissed his face and felt a hand on her shoulder. When she looked up, no one was there. She looked down at Pup, and he was gone.

The next week was sad for the entire barn. When Jag would see Jaime or Claire walking down the road he would whiny and drop his head from his half door, waiting for his fifty licks. Claire tried to calm him but she knew the heartache and just gave him love. On the fourth day, Jag didn’t look for Pup anymore and Claire felt heartbroken about that as well. She would never forget him and she said his name at least once a day to keep him alive in everyone’s heart.

Jaime had Pup cremated and his ashes were put into a beautiful wood box with his name engraved and below it said ‘Beloved Pup still lives in every beat of our hearts.’ To Jaime, it felt like completion, to Ian it felt like a promise he would live forever as long as they lived. Claire kissed the box and put it back on the shelf. Her fingers lingered on it for a moment. She looked at Jaime and wrapped her arms around him. “Thank you for keeping him near us.”

Claire patted her pockets, looked through her purse, and checked the calendar before leaving the house, day after day, the feeling she was forgetting something made leaving a struggle. It was a month before she no longer felt it. The summer was long and kids wanted to swim at Sarah’s but Claire just couldn’t. A couple of times a week, Sarah would come and get them, bringing them home in the evening, happy and exhausted. Claire went on without Pup but she remembered him more times than she admitted. She didn’t wash that part of her cheek where he licked her before he died. The water would run over the spot but she couldn’t put soap to it. Then one day she did.

A year later, She and Jaime stood with Ian, now twelve years old, at Sky Harbor airport. He was nervous and Claire kissed him over and over until he stopped her. “Mom, I’ll be back in two months!” She could see his anticipation and excitement and let that calm her. He wanted to be in Scotland, that did not mean he wanted to be away from her. Jaime helped with partner-parent looks that were compassionate and knowing, reminding her not to burden the lad with separation issues. Ian hugged his mother tight enough to last two months and then hugged his da, thanking him for letting him go. Claire watched every step he took as he walked to his gate. Jaime held her tight and wiped at her tears. She couldn’t leave the airport until his plane was no longer visible.
On the way home, Jaime turned into the Mountain Cafe and Claire was delighted. A greasy cheeseburger and imported beer would take her mind off Ian for a little while. They were the only ones crazy enough to sit on the patio in the summer but the misters and fans kept them comfortable. Jaime teased her between bites with whispered naughty promises that slowly built her heat as the beers worked on her last nerve. She pushed her tongue into his mouth and heard him gasp, seconds later he asked for the check and closed her door with a purpose. Faith would be with Sarah at the movies for the afternoon and Jaime would take full advantage of the privacy.

After whisky, a bubble bath, and her favorite piano music pumping into their room, he laid a lustful and compliant wife in their bed. He reminded her, in sweet detail, of his undying love and devotion. Curled around each other breathing hard he pushed his face into her ear, “my Sassenach, I love ye.”
2035
For years, Jaime was the custodian of the ledgers and breeding data. It kept him late several nights a month and Claire would bring his dinner to him and clean tack until they could walk home together. Before he put the books back in the safe he flipped through the pages of horses they had sold over the years. Jaime knew they were missing crucial information about the greenies after they sold but he never had time to track them. He was a major player in selling horse flesh in the Southwest but he could be much higher on the pecking order with a bit more work. Or so he believed.

“I’ve neglected to keep track of the greenies over the years.” He told Claire on their way home. “It’s startin to get under my skin like I’m missin the big picture.”

‘Keep track how?’

“The horses that went on to win the big shows, became nationally ranked, or even went on to win Europe. What if some of them did so? How would that endorsement help the barn?”

Claire could see clearly what he was getting at. “Your right you know. If there are champions that came from your barn that would mean a great deal. It would take some time but ownership and registration records, as well as public searches on the internet, are a good place to start. But you know that already so what is stopping you?”

“I’ve kept the records for almost twenty years and it’s tedious. I do without ye forty hours a week and I’m not wantin to give up any more time with you and the kids. But, I’m bothered about somethin big that I’m missin.”

“Like you said, you have been the sole record keeper from the beginning. Maybe it’s time to split the project up and give each of us a piece. Angus, Rupert, me, and you, we all make the same percentage on the greenies. It’s time we pull our weight in the data department.” Claire called out to the kids they were home. There were distant noises from behind closed doors of their rooms.

They sat down at the table and Claire brought out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. She was thinking. “Let’s use an average of 4.5 groups of greenies per year due to summers, that’s eighteen horses for nineteen years…three hundred forty-two? Could that be right, it seems so high.”

“It’s right Sassenach. A daunting number, even for four people to share. But, how many went on to be superstars? I could be missin somethin that would set our barn away from the others and even increase the margin on what we’re sellin today. It’s been creepin up Sassenach but I feel it in my stomach.”

“That is like eighty-five horses each we have to track. We need a list of the registered names since you reduce them to a number when they arrive. Is that information available?”

Jaime grabbed Claire in a tango stance, “of course mo chridhe. Making it complicated was all I had to do in the beginning.” He stepped her across the kitchen. “Now, let us see how good the three of ye are with numbers and research!” He dipped Claire deeply and kissed her neck as she laughed.

A team meeting was called at ten o’clock the following morning. Claire made wisecracks back at Angus’s insults and Rupert played referee, as usual. Jaime cleared his throat. “Since the Sassenach has to return for surgery this afternoon, let us begin.” He held up a list of three hundred and fifty-one horses, the year they were sold, and their registered name.
Claire was incredulous. “How was that list assembled so quickly?”

Jaime blushed with embarrassment. “Ruby has been buildin a data…something for storage of all my records and she spends time gettin all my numbers in there. I think it’s a waste of time since I already have them but she is a good girl and had her heart set. So I asked her opinion on photocopies of my books to make lists for all of us. I swear to Christ she pushed maybe five or six buttons and this is what came out. It’s a miracle to be sure.” Jaime looked at the list and shook his head like Ruby was a magician. “I didna ask her to give us equal parts for each year but I think she can do it.”

Angus was growing weary of the digression and asked Jaime what he wanted from them.

Jaime rolled his eyes at Angus’s lack of appreciation for Ruby’s computer talents. He spent five minutes explaining the project, the goal, and what it might mean in dollars and cents. The uptick in interest from Angus and Rupert was noticeable. He was happy his team saw the value of the information. Even if it didn’t become a giant feather in their cap, or a neon sign that said: “buy your horse from these guys, they turn out champions”. That last bit was offered by an excited Rupert and Jaime was satisfied they saw the big picture.

“Angus looked at the list. Eighty-eight horses to track, that’s a lot. How much time do we have?”

Claire spoke up, “why don’t we take one year of horses sold each month. I can create a letter of inquiry for the registration record to use as a template. Fill in the registration data you have and mail one for each horse. After that, search rankings and show data for the most recent registered name. Would that be a good start?” She could tell Rupert was resistant. “Look at this way,” she said to the group, “this month we mail out inquiries for the horses sold last year. Next month we do the same for the horses sold the year before that. Each month we will be filling in data to mail out registration inquiries for four horses each. Easy!”

Rupert was nodding and Angus was still bored. Jaime smiled at his wonderful wife. He would finally know if this was his prize or if it was nothing. He was excited at the prospect and wondered how many other barns published this credential on their website. He made a note to ask Ruby.

The group was promised a new list that separated the horses into the year they were sold, along with a template for mailing. Jaime could tell his friends were starting to see the potential credential this would give them. He knew they would do their best.

In the weeks that followed, Ruby enhanced her database to include wins, ranking, current owner, rider, and monetary gain. She would have to estimate the money from what prize information was still available on the internet.

“Jaime, we can call the show sponsors if the money is no longer available on public searches.” She had two kids whining at her to go home but she didn’t seem to notice.

“We’ll see if that will be needed. Thank ye Ruby.” He watched her stare at her feet. She did not turn to leave. Jaime felt an uneasy feeling about what Ruby would say next. “Is somethin the matter lass.”

She looked at Jaime with red eyes and wiped the tears from her face. “Why am I not a member of the team? I work as hard as anybody and I always have the best interest of the barn. It’s true, when I came here it was solely to get me closer to eventing in Europe.” She laughed at the notion. “For the last decade my efforts are only for the barn. So why am I different from Angus, Rupert and Claire?” Her eyes were pushing out huge tears and her children were still and staring.

Jaime was taken completely by surprise and let her words sink into his consciousness. After several minutes he said, “I don’t know Ruby. It’s the only answer I can give ye. But yer point is well made.
There is an inequity here. Not because we dinna love ye. Maybe because we’re not noticing somethin verra important.” He took her hands and looked into her eyes, “let me make this right Ruby. I will assemble the team and we will do somethin about this. I don’t know how it will go. We are all equal shares investing in the greenies, but it’s high time to recognize yer contribution.”

Ruby wouldn’t look at him but she shook her head. “Thank you, Jaime.” She left the office and Jaime exhaled the breath he was holding. Shame on all of us, for not recognizing Ruby’s contribution until she asked. He needed to make this right, before the new project, or anything else. Ruby became his priority at that moment. He fired off a text to Rupert and Angus…’meeting at nine tomorrow.’

Jaime seemed needy all evening, Claire noticed. He kept wrapping his arms around her, holding her hands, touching her leg or arm while they navigated their evening at home. He turned the lights out and set the alarm. Walking back to their bedroom he noticed the bottle of whiskey and two glasses on their table. The fire was roaring, lights were off, and he smelled bubble bath. Claire was up to her eyebrows in bubbles. “Have ye seen my wife in there miss?”

Claire blew bubbles at him and suggested he join her, then she insisted. Jaime was always reluctant to have a hot soak because it left him completely relaxed with no want or desire to conquer mountains or his wife. He would rather work for his calm center the old fashioned way. He brought the whiskey to the tub and poured while pulling off his clothes.

Claire looked at him and saw little change from the years that aged him. He was still larger than life, devastatingly handsome, muscular, like a marble Greek statue. Whatever was in his head tonight was going to be righted, come hell or high hot water.

Jaime dropped into the hot bubbles and sighed while he pulled Claire in front of him. She laid back on his chest and washed his feet with a rough cloth making him moan with pleasure. She turned toward him and did the same with any skin she could find above the water line.

She poured another whiskey for him and watched his face finally relax when he was nearly completely submerged. “Are you finding any answers love?”

He touched her cheek. “I have the answer for how to fix this. I havena found a way to fix my guilt and shame.”

“What is it?”

“Will ye play a game with me Sassenach?” When he saw her nod he asked, “what five words come to mind when I say Angus?”

“Brutish, angry, talented, impatient, timely.”

“And Rupert?”

“Slow, thorough, honest, loyal, pest”

“And Ruby?”

“Hardworking, dependable, no complaining, artist, love. What kind of game is this?”

Jaime dropped his head. “We have all done Ruby wrong and it’s my fault because I’m the leader. She asked me tonight, why not her? She’s waited ten years to be pulled onto the team. She hung her head in front of me tonight and asked me, why not her?”
“Oh my God, Ruby.” Claire’s eyes were big and round and she stared at the bubbles while her mind wrapped around Jaime’s statement. I never thought… I never wanted to exclude her, I love Ruby and want everything for her.”

“I’ve given it some thought tonight and I dinna ken how we never thought of it but Ruby did. I don’t think it’s about the money she could make. She wants to be on the team.”

He wrapped himself around a startled Claire. “It’s aright Sassenach, I made an agreement with you and the lads that no others would be allowed to invest in the greenies, do ye remember? I plan to amend that agreement tomorrow morning at nine o’clock with a team vote to bring Ruby onto the team.”

“What if they say no?”

“He who votes no will return to Scotland a rich man.” His voice was strong and laced with conviction. He would write a massive check and drive them to the airport.

“I agree Jaime.” Claire put her head on Jaime’s chest and he pulled her jaw up to kiss her deeply. She teased him with her tongue poking in between his lips and then pulling back. He struggled with wanting to feel her invade his mouth and she felt him grab her hair roughly and tilt her head back. He spoke a half inch in front of her lips, “taste me Sassenach.” He crushed her in a kiss and she let her tongue joyfully invade his mouth and senses. While he moaned he lifted her to straddle him and pushed her hips down the length of him. He leaned forward and sucked her nipples hard until she gasped. He went back to a deep kiss and sucking her tongue deeper into his mouth.

Claire was feeling frantic for him. Her body shook with need and she lifted herself and dropped down on him taking him into her wet warmth. They both gasped. She rocked him deep inside her but Jaime pulled her upper body to him so her pelvis was up and away from him. He held her tight and thrust upward at least twenty or thirty times. Claire could only hang on and moan.

“Pull the plug mo chridhe.”

Jaime ran a towel over her and carried her to the bed turning her over and pulling her pelvis up into the air. He gently pressed her arms and head to the bed and then held her arms from his position behind her. She was absolutely at his mercy. When his tongue found her he pulled her arms back toward him bringing her closer to his mouth. He rocked her world and Claire exploded with her release. Jaime held her hips and rammed her until he was close. He did not want to chase his release just yet. He turned her around and thrust into her while he captured her mouth. The feeling was exquisite for him and he continued his assault hearing their stomachs slap in time with his thrusting. He felt his balls contract sharply and electric pulsing start in his core as he slammed home and stopped. Quite unexpectedly her inner muscle grabbed him and milked his release as Claire’s back arched and she moaned his name.

He held her tightly, “Sassenach, I have somethin important to ask ye. Is that what happens in old age, the orgasms just sneak up and BLAM!” He startled her and she laughed at him trying to find some skin to hit. Jaime tackled her and rolled her over twice laughing at her expression. He grabbed her wrists, “ye know how I like it when ye fight me mo gradhag, dinna start something ye dinna plan to finish.” He smacked her naked butt and pulled her close to his warmth. “Thank ye love for always knowin what I need.” He kissed her neck and turned off the light.

Angus and Rupert sat down with Jaime at nine o’clock the next morning. They anticipated getting their list of horses to track so when Jaime said Ruby’s name they were surprised. He filled them in on Ruby’s request, told them there were two yes votes and asked each of them to weigh in. He was prepared to say goodbye to either of them that voted no and he held his breath.
Rupert looked at Angus, “how did we not do this years ago?”

Angus shrugged his shoulders and looked back, dinna ever think about it.”

Jaime finally understood Claire’s irritation when they conversed like she wasn’t right there. He looked around for a crop. Instead of chasing them out of the barn like she always did he cleared his throat. “What is your vote gentlemen?”

“Rupert asked Angus if they should make it retroactive.”

“Guys!” Jaime yelled rolling his eyes. They both looked at him startled and nodded their heads yes.

“I canna make up for the ten years she’s been waiting but I don’t want to minimize it either. Help me find a way to tell her she’s one of us now.”

Rupert looked at Angus, “he gave Claire a horse. Maybe he should give Ruby a horse too.”

Jaime lost his patients, “we’re done here, get out.”

His two friends had launched a conversation about giving Ruby a horse and barely registered they were dismissed.

Jaime wanted to make an impression on Ruby that this was a big deal because it was. So many investors had wanted in over the years, but Ruby had earned her place. He wondered if they would be able to come up with the money for the buy-in. No matter, he could give them a loan or hold her place until she raised the money. Whatever worked best for Ruby.

In the end, Jaime gathered the team and they each apologized for waiting so long to bring her on board. Jaime made a formal request she join the team, Ruby cried and hugged everyone, then Jaime gave her the bill to buy-in and her eyeballs nearly popped out.

“Dinna fash yerself, I’ll give you a loan Ruby.”

“No, it's okay, I have that much saved from my art. Shawn made me keep it separate so I could buy a warmblood someday. This is better. Thanks you guys.”

The days and weeks flew by as they always did and the responses from the inquiry letters started coming back slowly. Ruby jumped on the computer to start looking for the registered names and ownership associated with showing. She started local and small and got nothing. The responses were piling up and Ruby was finding nothing. Jaime was feeling deflated.

Ruby could not believe that none of their greenies ever won something big. What would be the odds of that? She bumped her show level up and up again losing her conviction. Angus came through the office to ask if she found anything and suggested she search past registrations and ownership.

“When a horse does well, those in it for money will sell right after a big win.” Keep yer faith Miss Ruby.”

Ruby had her nose in the computer day and night it seemed. Jaime just moved around her and the two of them made it work in the tiny office.

“Ruby ye can have the office in the other barn for your own if ye want.” He didn’t notice that her body had stiffened and she was no longer exhaling.

“Jaim…Oh my God!! Oh my God! I found one and it’s really big! Jaime!” He ran around his desk and looked at a beautiful gelding and a tiny girl riding her winning round for the European
championship. He watched the horse move and knew exactly who he was.

“Guys!” he couldn’t take his eyes off the screen. Ruby was cross-checking everything and near hysterical that one of Jaime’s greenies took the number one slot in Junior European eventing. Rupert, Angus and finally Claire squeezed into the office to watch.

“I remember that horse, Mr. Gorgeous we called him, right guys?” His rider and owner, little Safron Osborne was number one in the FEI Junior European Championship. The video ended and the team looked shell shocked suddenly.

Jaime smiled inside and out, waiting for the team to comprehend the importance of this win to their business. One by one they looked to their leader who was now laughing. He let out a whoop that rattled the corral bars and opened his arms to his shocked wife. “Ruby, dinna give up. There are more, I just know it.”

Jaime couldn’t turn his mind off that night. He knew this would launch them into a new stratosphere and their world was about to quake with buyers beating a path to their barn. He finally gave up and poured himself some whiskey to take a walk outside.

He looked down at the Center with pride. He had four greenies that were nearly ready, and their value just jumped forty percent. He sipped the whiskey and smiled. It took almost twenty years but he was on top again and he wouldn’t waste a moment of it. “Scotland, ye beauty, we’re comin,” he said to the night sky.
Jaime looked out at the field looking for Claire and saw her leaning up against the bordering fence watching the sunset. Even at forty-six, she was a strikingly beautiful woman. Maybe more so than in her youth because her eyes were a deeper amber and her hair had silver streaks that he loved. Ever since Jag passed away last year he would find her walking the field alone late in the afternoon. He knew it had something to do with Jag but couldn’t imagine what she found comforting out there. In their youth, she was surrounded by animals that she loved and took care of. Like Pup, Jag, Fred, and Ginger. They were all gone and she seemed so empty to him. Many times he wanted to adopt a shelter dog but she did not have much interest. She wasn’t sad outwardly, but Jaime saw her soul and wanted to help.

His life had become ridiculously busy since they announced to the world they were trainers of champions. Ruby pulled out every one of their greenies who had gone on to greatness here and in Europe. The website home page featured large HD pictures of their four best winners. There was a gallery for pictures of the other winners, the team and their credentials, and Claire as head rider, now retired. The layout was reworked so many times Dougal called and growled into the phone to leave it be for a few months. Jaime smiled on the other end knowing Dougal was proudly showing off his kinsman who flourished under his generous loans.

Jaime watched Claire, absolutely still looking at the setting sun and wondered what she thought about, what she missed, how her life had changed. He wanted so badly to put the sparkle back in her eyes but he didn’t know how and she denied feeling blue or empty.

Jaime started walking toward the field. He would take Claire home and talk this out with her. Before he took five steps Angus called to him from the barn and said it was important so Jaime turned around. Before he knew it the guys were saying goodbye for the night and Jaime felt sad and ashamed he let the business take him away from Claire for one more evening. He didn’t bother with his briefcase. He locked the office and called to Shawn to lock up as he jogged up to the house.

His dinner was covered with plastic wrap on the kitchen counter and Claire was laying down in their room. It was only eight o’clock and he wondered if she wasn’t feeling well.

“Sassenach, whats got in bed so early lass?”

Claire sat up against the headboard and took his hand. It took her several minutes before she started talking and Jaime felt sudden dread.

“Claire, I know somethin has been botherin ye and we need to talk about it.” He touched her cheek.

Claire looked deep in Jaime’s eyes, not wanting to hurt him, but wanting him to know just how much her life had changed. She cupped his cheek, “I can’t complain to an empty room love. I can’t cuddle with a body that doesn’t feel me next to him, and I can’t share my life with a husband who isn’t here.” Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Jaime felt like the air had evacuated from the room and the floor was about to tip into oblivion. His eyes felt like they would melt out of the sockets as he searched her face for the truth and found it right there between them. He was stunned into silence and struggled with all his love to be present and speak.

“Claire…I…I didna ken. I’m sorry…I didna mean to abandon ye. It’s all for ye and our future and I know I’m workin more but I focus on our future…and I’ve forgotten about the present. Christ, what
have I done.” He looked at Claire’s sad eyes and saw the loneliness in them and his heart hurt for her. He finally saw the distance between them and his own hand in creating it.

Jaime sat up and pulled Claire into his lap. “My Sassenach, my love, my whole life, is you. I have made a terrible mistake tryin to make money while the business was good.” He pushed the hair out of her face and pulled her chin up so he could look in her sad eyes. “I’m sorry Claire. I made a mistake and let a growin bank account take my energy from ye. I didna see what I was doin to ye, to us. Christ, can ye forgive me for bein so selfish?”

Claire continued to cry and Jaime held her tightly against his chest. Anything he thought of doing now seemed like too little, too late. His heart was pounding as he considered the consequence of his neglect.

Claire heard Jaime become frantic with his plea for a second chance and promise to make things right between them. She wanted to tell him it would be okay, they could work through this but her lungs would not fill with air. She tried to breathe but nothing happened. When her head was spinning from lack of oxygen she knew this was a heart attack and struggled to speak to Jaime. So much to tell him… needed to tell him…she couldn’t speak but showed him her terrified eyes before she slumped over into unconsciousness.

The sirens split the quiet night and Ruby ran out of the workshop and looked up. She saw the ambulance scream up the driveway and a gurney come out. She started running, almost blind from the dark. She heard Shawn behind her, running with her, not saying a word. When she got to the house they were wheeling Claire out and Jaime almost ran into her.

“Claire’s had a heart attack and I’m goin in the ambulance.”

Ruby shouted to Jaime not to worry, she would handle everything. She picked up her phone and called Angus and Rupert, and wondered if she should try to find Sarah. She felt overwhelmed with fear for Claire. She never expected this, never. Claire was invincible, like superwoman. How could this happen?

Rupert and Angus sat in Ruby’s living room and stared at the floor. They looked paste white and sat very still. They all felt suspended in a nightmare and did not know what to do until the doorbell rang three times shocking them all.

Shawn opened the door and fell into his uncle’s arms. Dougal gave him comfort for two minutes and then morphed into a general. “Get ye wee faces out of ye hands, we have work to do.” He strode up to Ruby, ”what needs done lass? These wee hours are crucial. Tell me what ye ken of it.”

She stared at him, mouth agape. “Find sister Mary Frances in cloister at the Benedictine Monastery.”

Dougal’s face looked brighter. He had a mission and markers, it was time to call them in. He walked outside to wake the Arch Bishop up.

Ruby, Shawn, Rupert, and Angus sat together in the living room. No one talked, they just waited for something to happen. When Ruby’s phone rang she nearly jumped off the ottoman she was sitting on.

She said “OK” and clicked off. "Claire is in surgery and expected to recover after the bypass. Jaime is asking all of us to go to bed because she is out of danger. She looked at Rupert and Angus and they stood up to leave. “He promised me, she’s going to be fine.”

Dougal came in finally and looked at the empty living room. Ruby explained what Jaime said and
Dougal seemed to accept the news with a smile. “Dinna fash Ruby, Claire has God.” Dougal lifted his phone as he said it and then bid them goodnight. He stopped at the Fraser house and left a note for Faith to call her father. Then he left smiling.

Ruby tried to relax and just believe that Jaime was right and all would be well. By one o’clock in the morning, she couldn’t stand it anymore so she kissed Shawn and headed for the hospital. She sat alone in the waiting room staring at nothing.

"Do ye mind if I sit here lass?"

Ruby looked up at Angus and shook her head no while she cried. Angus, in a rare moment, held Ruby and stroked her hair reminding her how invincible Claire was.

An hour later they were both roused out of their thoughts by Rupert who took his place and stared at the floor.

Jaime sat in the dark hospital room staring at his wife. They had just brought her here from the recovery room. It was his first opportunity to be with her since she collapsed the night before.

“Please forgive me Claire. Please forgive me for not…” Jaime cried like his heart had broken, his happiness was gone, his hope for the future extinguished. He cried for time lost, promises broken, and love lost. “Claire…”

“Forgiven.”

Jaime’s head jerked up and he jumped to her bedside. “Claire, love!” He felt her hand on his cheek and he covered it with his own. “I lost sight of the one I love most in the world and it made ye sick. I’ll no forgive myself but I promise to spend the rest of my days making it right Claire.”

“Don’t cry love. We will recover together.”

Jaime could see Claire losing her battle to stay awake so he just stroked her arm so she would know he was there. He kissed her hand and whispered, “don’t leave me Sassenach.”

“I willna"

“Daddy?”

Jaime jumped up and grabbed Faith who sobbed into his chest. He held her tight and talked softly to her, explaining her mother was doing better and would recover.

“Faith, come here.” Claire looked up at her daughter’s tears and smiled weakly. “Did you clean up the kitchen and your room.”

Faith’s eyebrows shot up. “Um, I…I don’t remember mom, but I will as soon as I get home.” Faith took a deep breath and felt better for some reason. “Daddy said you’re gonna be okay and come home.”

“Not until the kitchen is clean.” She smiled at Faith, knowing the only way to calm her daughter was to act like her mother. She could care less about the kitchen, she cared everything about comforting Faith.

Claire was fighting to keep her eyes open but each smile or word spoken seemed to push her closer to oblivion. Her eyelids closed and she went into the black to rest and recover.
Hours passed through the day and Claire did not wake up again. The doctor promised Jaime it was her body healing from the trauma and he was not to worry. He worried anyway. He was concerned for Faith who sat holding her mother’s hand since she arrived six hours ago. He had to get her home but he didn’t want to leave Claire. He felt the door open and moved his legs to the side so the nurse could get next to Claire’s bed. He felt a hand on his knee and looked up.

Her head was covered in a heavy black veil, the color of her smock. Her eyes were like an old friend to Jaime and he stood up smiling at her.

Sarah embraced Jaime and Faith as she came around the bed. She spoke softly to Faith about her strong mother and God’s love for her family. Sarah made her way to Claire and held her hand while she prayed for her recovery.

Jaime felt like he was intruding somehow and told Sarah he was taking Faith home to rest and would be right back. He pulled Faith out into the corridor and walked toward the hospital entrance. He passed the waiting room and caught familiar movement out the corner of his eye. He stopped and backed up looking into the room seeing the team, elbows on knees, gazing at the floor.

“What are ye doin here?”

They all jumped up and circled Jaime asking questions. He saw each of them bleary-eyed from no sleep. He told them Claire had not woken up again today but the doctor said she would. He explained her bypass surgery and bright prognosis.

“She is going to be fine. Sara is with her and I’m comin right back after I get Faith home. I want all of ye home to yer beds.” Jaime was commanding when he needed to be and the team followed orders. They all went home but would drift back, one by one over the course of the afternoon.

Claire opened her eyes and smiled at Sarah. She squeezed her hand. “My friend.. how are you here?”

Sarah smiled, “well, I can’t stay long…I’ve already broken so many rules it will be hell to pay. Got it feels good to talk. You know we’re not allowed to talk. I really miss talking.”

Claire felt warm and safe looking at her friend. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Sarah sat on the edge of the bed and looked at her dearest friend. “I’m always with you in spirit. I pray for you and those you love all day, every day. Until my last breath, you will be in my mind and heart.”

Claire knew Sarah to be very intelligent, worldly and a gifted practitioner. After Sarah left, she struggled with what could make her gave up her connection to everything and everyone, take her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and live cloistered for the rest of her life. It didn’t make sense to Claire and it possessed her thoughts for many months. Claire felt the bud of an idea start to grow in her mind. It was so preposterous that she didn’t even want to acknowledge it. The idea persisted until Claire finally looked straight at what she was avoiding. What if Sarah knows something? Really knows for sure? What could make a smart independent woman walk away from her extraordinary life? Something more extraordinary.

“I have questions, Sarah.”

“I broke the rules of the monastery, my vow of silence, my disconnection to the material world and I could be in big trouble so I must leave you.” She put her hand up expecting Claire to implore her. “Read the book of John. Think about it for a week and then read it again.” She was beaming at
Claire. “Find a spiritual teacher and let them help you find your answers. You’re a broken pot Claire and I am so happy about that.”

“Sarah, I’m not a pot, I’m not broken either, I just have questions about what you know. We were good friends, my dearest friend, and you say I’m broken. That’s why you left me?”

Sarah held Claire’s face in both her hands. “Look at these people Claire.” She waved her hand at the corridors filling up with hospital employees and visitors. "They move through their day looking down, all closed in against the world. They are unbroken pots with their lids tightly sealed. If I take off their lid and put a bright light inside then close the lid again what do I see of the light? Nothing. If I put a bright light into a broken pot, the light shines through and I can see it illuminate the world and touch those close to it. Claire, I love you so much, I didn’t leave you, I pray for you every day so I will always be near you in spirit. Never forget that. Your true quest is to understand the light that shines through your cracks. When you understand that you will know the true God and know your parents have been with you your whole life. Read John and know I’m praying for you. Sarah looked at the clock on the wall.

Claire wanted to argue and implore Sarah to stay but her fatigue won the battle and she closed her eyes to the blackness.

Sarah saw Jaime on her way out and said goodbye.

“Have ye made another bargain Sarah?”

“Yes,” she smiled up at Jaime, “I have bargained a soul. A beautiful soul.” And she was gone.

Jaime slipped into Claire’s room and held her hand. She was deep in sleep and did not stir. He kissed her hand and prayed in Gaelic for his love’s recovery. He asked God to give him another chance to love her and promised his obedience for the chance. He felt Claire’s cool hand touch his cheek and looked at her beautiful amber eyes. For a long moment she held his gaze and he felt the promises that were still between them.

“Does yer heart still belong to me Claire,” he whispered.

“Aye,” she whispered back before her eyes closed again.

When Jaime brought Claire home she was quiet, almost seemed fearful. He held her hand and smiled encouragingly. Coming up Ironwood Drive she saw the Equine center and a large moving van parked on the road leading up to Sarah’s house. Sarah’s old house. She noticed the for sale sign was gone and let it sink in that Sarah would not be returning.

Jaime stayed with Claire for three days. He was right next to her day and night. He wasn’t calling the team, he wasn’t looking out the front door, he acted like the barn did not exist. Claire was concerned about the business and on the third day, she ordered him back to work. When the front door closed she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Jaime walked out of the barn and stared up at their house. Ruby came up behind him and slapped him on the shoulder making him jump. “Christ, Ruby ye almost scared me half to death!”

“Ya, that’s what happens when you’re old.” She smiled at him in a wicked way. “Are you ready to paint some color back into Claire’s life?”

He looked down at her confused. “Do I want to paint her?”

Ruby rolled her eyes, “no, infuse color into her life. She has empty nest syndrome Jaime. Ian is in
Scotland full time now and Faith is beating the boys back at the community college. She goes home to an empty house after work and comes out here to feel close to Jag and Pup I guess. I know what might help.” She looked into Jaime’s hopeful eyes. “My Mom is breeding toy Yorkies and has a female that is so special and rare. I asked her to save it for Claire and she agreed. The puppy is a baby-faced toy Yorkshire Terrier. Very special, very rare, and I know this dog is what Claire needs.”

“Ruby, that doesna make sense, a little dog. We run an equine center, the thing would get smashed or eaten by Coyotes. No. Claire needs a big dog that can run into the stalls and race across the desert.”

“Ok. Think like a man and surprise her with something wrong. I get it.” Ruby spun on her heel and walked away.

“Ruby…wait.”

If it would make Claire happy and fill her life with sunshine Jaime would have purchased an alligator for her. It was so not about him but he felt like he had no direction. Nothing she said or did gave him any idea what kind of dog would make her happy. In his desperation, he put his faith in Ruby and hoped she was right. When they made arrangements to sneak over the Palm Desert where Ruby’s mother still lived and Jaime was excited to see her. Jaime loved Ruby’s mother. Since her father passed, Jaime would call her once a week and check in because she was family now.

When they walked into the house there was a great disturbance in the peace and the dogs had mixed opinions about that. The adult animals barked like they wanted to raise the roof. The puppies coward together and peered around a corner at what their parents were barking at. After thirty minutes of being social, Ruby went looking for the puppy. Her mother promised it was somewhere in the house. The last room to search was the laundry room and there she was, sacked out on a pile of dirty clothes and towels.

Ruby smiled at the adorable tiny puppy and picked it up in one hand. The puppy wagged its tiny tail and yawned at Ruby taking a sniff of her sweater. She told Jaime to hold out one hand, palm up, and then put the puppy in it.

The puppy was quite interested in Jaime’s red hair and exotic scents and wagged its tail wanting to cuddle and smell him.

Jaime looked closely at the bundle of black and caramel colored curls and tried to see it’s face. “That’s no dog. It’s a… it’s a…no a dog.” Right then the puppy barked right at him and wagged its tail. Then it whimpered and broke Jaime’s heart. He pulled it to his chest and the puppy jumped up at his face and tasted him. The tiny tail never stopped wagging back and forth.

Jaime was in love with a dog that weighed less than two pounds. As the group talked the puppy worked his way up to Jaime’s shoulder where she curled up and went to sleep. Shawn was laughing, “That is the very definition of opposites,” as he looked from Jaime to the puppy.

Ruby hugged her mother and asked her again to consider moving to Arizona but her mom just shushed her. She was happy living among the church’s congregation and she wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon.

She approached Jaime and held his hands. "The puppy is for my Claire, for all she’s done for Ruby over the years. I love her and this puppy is the best I could ever hope to gift her. Thank you both for giving Ruby an extraordinary life.” She kissed his hands and he struggled with his tears. He was sure his mam would be just like her and he missed her so much.
They packed enough puppy supplies to last the rest of its life it seemed to Jaime. When they piled into the truck and sped down the highway the puppy started to whine and shake. Ruby tried to comfort her but she wiggled until Ruby set her down in her lap. The puppy promptly walked onto Jaime’s legs and curled up in his groin. She didn’t move for the rest of the trip.

It was dark when they pulled into the center and Jaime was suddenly worried about Claire. He made sure Faith would be home with her all day and had made an excuse about a long meeting downtown. Now all he wanted to do is be in their bed holding her. When Ruby and Shawn got out he made for home with a gift he prayed would heal Claire’s heart.

Faith was overjoyed to see the puppy and kissed it a dozen times holding it close. She mimed that Claire was in bed sleeping and handed the puppy back to Jaime.

He slid into bed next to his wife and let the puppy go. It pranced over to Claire and licked her face, then ran back to Jaime. He waited while Claire brushed a hand across her face still dreaming. The puppy pranced back to Claire’s face and became very animated trying to get her attention.

“Grrrr..ruf”. The puppy, up on her hind legs, licked Claire’s face with her tail wagging wildly. Jaime was quite taken with the whole event. It appeared the puppy knew she was Claire’s gift and wasn’t about to let her sleep through it.

Claire opened her eyes at the scratching on her face. All she saw was curly brown hair and the smell of a puppy. She gasped and the puppy came down and licked her like crazy, biting at her chin and wagging her tail.

“What is this?”

Jaime smiled at her, “they say its a dog.” Hearing Jaime’s voice the puppy bounded for him and jumped at his face licking and wiggling. Claire got a good look at the tiny puppy and sat up making the puppy bound back to her. It jumped onto her lap and Claire scooped it up and held it to her face.

Claire decided this dog was the cutest living creature on four legs. “She is the sweetest! Are we babysitting? For how long? Whose is she?”

Jaime was feeling brave by Claire’s excitement with the tiny dog and he was about to tell her when….

“God, can you imagine something this tiny living here permanently? What a nightmare that would be.” Then she smiled at the puppy and kissed it over and over.

Jaime hung his head and mumbled something about finding Faith. He failed. He sat down hard on the couch and knew he failed to provide the thing that would make Claire happy. Wait until I get my hands on ye Ruby, he thought.

Faith walked into the living room and plopped down next to her father. “What wrong da?”

“Your mother thinks the dog is a nightmare.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Yes, she told me so.”

“Da, if I tell you some stuff that might hurt your feelings will you be mad at me?”

“Of course not lass, never. What is it you want me to know.”
“Mom’s been living in your world where the animals are big and shared. Small dogs bond to one
person, at least that’s what I see with my friend’s parents dogs. If mom allows the puppy into her life
it will be bigger than Pup and devoted to her. I think you need to guilt her into taking the dog
because you drove all the way to get it and blah blah.”

Jaime looked at his daughter for a long moment and then kissed her cheek. “Thank you Faith. You
make sense to me.”

Jaime made some dinner and walked into the bedroom. Claire had fallen asleep and the puppy was
curled up under her chin. He couldn’t resist snapping several pictures with his phone. He was setting
up a bed table for Claire’s dinner when he heard “grrrrr ruf, grrrrrr.” Jaime looked down at the
fierce tiny dog who seemed to be protecting her mistress. When Jaime sank to his knees the puppy
pranced right up to him to lick kisses.

“Yer a might fickle lassie. Can ye wake up yer mistress so she can eat?” The puppy sat down and
stared at him. He pointed to Claire, he put his hand on Claire’s hip and the puppy yipped up a storm
waking Claire up.

Claire looked around for the noise and her face became bright and excited when the puppy started
licking her face and biting her hair. Claire giggled and coo’ed kissed and hugged.

Jaime watched intently and felt immensely happy he had trusted Ruby. No matter what Claire said,
she already loved the tiny thing.

“What is her name Jaime?”

“Sorcha’s heart. But, ye can call her whatever ye want.”

“Why would I call it something, I’m sure the owner has named her. Why are you acting so strange?
Who’s dog is this?”

“It belongs to Sorcha, love. She is very rare and highly valued so if Sorcha doesna like her she can
sell her for a high price.”

“Why does Sorcha sound so familiar to me?”

“I’ve called ye Sorcha a time or two, years ago maybe. Sorcha is the light, Claire is the light, Sorcha
is Claire.” He looked at her with all the love in his soul for her.

“If I’m Sorcha then she is…mine?” Claire looked up at Jaime with tears welling up in her eyes. She
pulled the puppy close to her and let it sleep in her hand. She was a little overwhelmed at this very
spontaneous and special gift. It might be the most ridiculous choice of a dog but he made the choice
for her and it made her so happy.

“Thank you Jaime.” She kissed the tiny puppy and it growled in its sleep making them both laugh.

Eat mo chridhe and I’ll bring all of Sorcha’s stuff in so ye can look at it. Ten minutes later their king
size bed was covered with toys, bed, puppy pads, a harness and leash, special puppy food and more
Toys. Sorcha yawned and stretched. She focused on all the stuff and launched herself at it going from
one item to the next. Claire showed her the soft bed and Sorcha stayed for about ten seconds before
she was off again. When Jaime would laugh at her antics she would immediately prance over to him
and growl until he picked her up. A dozen licks and it was time to get down and go check on Claire,
then back to the toys. Claire couldn’t take her eyes off her and after a half hour the puppy yawned
and picked up a toy to bring with her and then laid down in her soft pink bed.
There was just enough room for Jaime to lie next to Claire so he held her in his arms and just let time pass them by. Ruby lass, I’m in yer debt, he thought.
Jaime walked down the main hall early the next morning and like every day he glanced into Donus’s old stall to say hello. He missed that horse and wondered if there would ever be another with that kind of spirit. He could hope.

“Boss we have a delivery today and the driver called and said he was getting in early. Two horses that need to be signed for condition on arrival. Just lettin ye know to be ready.”

“Where is the owner, Rupert?”

“Not here until later today, they got held up.”

“I don’t feel comfortable signing off on horses that arna mine. Where are they comin from?”

“Well, that is the thing I wanted to tell ye, Jaime. They were shipped from the Equine Therapeutic Center in Boston.”

Jaime looked at Rupert with an incredulous face. “What the hell?” He needed to have Claire here when they came in so she could examine them. Just thinking of her made him want to backtrack home and cuddle with her some more. He shook his head and walked toward the office. He glanced at the clipboard Rupert handed him and shook his head at the names of the incoming horses. Mickey and Minnie, those people have quite a gift for naming pairs.

Claire and Sorcha came down to the barn to wait for the two new therapy horses. The team gathered around the tiny puppy who was diving into the soft ground mixture of sand, and peat and dirt. She rolled and stuck her head completely under with her butt in the air and little tail wagging. She barked and everybody laughed. Claire looked up and saw a strange woman walk past the entrance to the arena. She asked Ruby to watch Sorcha and went after her.

“Excuse me, I’m Claire Fraser. Can I help you find something or someone?” Claire’s first thought was this girl was a bundle of contradictions. An odd thing to think but it was evident somehow.

The girl smiled a little with a closed mouth. “I’m Joe and I want to ride for this barn. You are one of the owner’s right? She held out her hand.

“Claire shook it and smiled. “I am.”

“May I speak freely?” When Claire nodded Joe continued. “I’ve seen your horses show the last few months and your getting slaughtered with terrible riders. It was like overnight you guys went from glittering to gross. So I’m here to apply for head rider.”

Claire was quite surprised by her bold, no-nonsense talk. She had a feeling about this girl and looked at her from head to toe. “What are you, about five foot seven?”

“Five eight ma’am.”

Claire asked her mundane questions about her shows and wins while she tried to figure this girl out. She had a cowboy hat on and no hair showing, sunglasses, almost boyish clothing, and boots that retail for almost $1,000, imported from Italy.
“Joe, take your sunglasses off and relax. I'll get Jaime.”

“Yes, ma'am.” She took her glasses off and Claire had to look twice. Her eyes were blue silver and her skin was like porcelain with heavy lips and a long aquiline nose. Her high cheekbones and neck looked like she would shatter if thrown from a horse. Claire wouldn't bother Jaime with this just yet.

“Rupert, this is Joe. Can you get the warmblood ready for her please? Come into the arena dear and meet my new puppy. Ruby, meet Joe.” Claire was horrified when Ruby started pointing and laughing like Joe was a clown or something.

“I know Joe… I told her to come and meet everybody.” Ruby launched at Joe and hugged her while Joe recoiled stiffly. “Her family is in my parish at home. Joe just came home from boarding school in Switzerland. I love her to pieces, even if she is a bit weird.” She said it teasingly and put an arm around Joe laughing. Claire couldn't miss the recoil at being touched again.

Rupert walked in with an enormous warmblood and stood in front of Joe. She took the reigns and pressed her forehead to the horses face. She smiled for the first time and her translucent skin-brightened with a pink glow. She was clearly in her element with a horse and Claire’s interest was piqued again.

“Go ahead and warm up. I'll get Jaime and the rest of the team.” She scooped Sorcha up and laughed while she sneezed the sand out of her nose.

“Jaime we have a rider to watch. Do ye have some time?”

“Almost Sassenach.” He pulled her into the office and closed the door while twisting the blinds closed. Sorcha was being her cutest and so happy to see Jaime but he didn't seem to notice her as he pulled Claire into his chest and kissed her deeply. His hand found her ample globes and pulled her to him until she was panting.

“Why did I come in here?” Claire shook her head and looked at her handsome husband. She knew if she asked he would pick her up and carry her off to a faraway destination and never look back.

Sorcha had become quite bored with being ignored and growled making her little body shake. Jaime wrapped his hand around her tiny body and they walked to the arena.

The whole team was assembled in middle arena Angus started asking Joe for gates. Her deep seat was so quiet and her leg so still that Jaime was interested. She commanded this enormous horse like they were old friends.

“Find her weakness, Angus,” Jaime said quietly. Angus motioned to Rupert to combine three jumps. One stride and a tough approach angle. Rupert and Ruby went to work constructing what he asked for.

Claire was very intrigued by this odd girl with the stunning eyes. She obviously had the best instruction in dressage, how did she jump?

Angus asked her for a height comfort zone and she shrugged her shoulders, “up to five, five and a half I guess.”

Jaime told him five point five and a four-foot spread. Angus laughed at first but noticed Jaime was
stone-faced. He walked away quickly to build the jump.

Claire watched Joe go through flying lead changes and an extended trot while the jumps were assembled. Her smile got wider and more excited by the minute. When Joe collected the warm blood and built his speed she held her breath and watched a textbook perfect execution over five and a half feet, almost as high as she was.

Jaime knew he was watching their next rider if he could get her. “Joe! That was a great ride. Give the horse to Rupert and come to the office.”

Claire noticed she nodded slightly but made eye contact with no one. “Ruby…is Joe autistic?”

Ruby was quiet. “Yes. She is a gifted rider but she is autistic and she should be on a horse with people who won’t exploit her.”

Claire’s eyes darted to Ruby and she smiled her understanding. “I get it, Ruby. She’s a special girl.”

Jaime looked at Claire and exhaled. He tread softly here because it was Claire’s domain for the last twenty years and he wanted her to lead. The greenies had made little money in the past three months because he couldn’t find a rider who was good enough. He knew this girl would turn it all around and his heart pounded in his with anticipation.

A strange voice was calling hello from down the aisle and Claire broke away to help. She grabbed Jaime’s hand and whispered: “get this girl on the team, whatever it takes.” She walked toward a fat truck driver who pushed his thumb over his shoulder. I am delivering two horses from Boston. Will you sign for them?

Claire smiled and walked around the man throwing a rope to Ruby so they could unload the precious cargo. Claire felt the unmistakable calm of the horse the second she shimmied to the front of the trailer to snap a lead. She took a moment to speak softly and scratch the face. The training center obviously recommended this barn due to the success with Fred and Ginger. Claire was so excited to meet the new equine therapist coming to Arizona.

The horse stepped out of the trailer like butter sliding off a muffin. Ruby was soon to follow with the second horse. They walked them to the outdoor arena and clapped their hands sending both galloping away, bucking and farting like their lives depended on it. Poor guys, they went straight across without stopping. Let’s leave them to unwind a couple of hours. I’ll get Rupert to throw in two flakes each and a bunch of grass hey. The curious horses came to a stop in front of them and Ruby whistled with her fingers starting a crazy run anew.

Claire put her arm around Ruby. “We are getting a new equine therapist, straight from Boston. I can’t wait to meet her!” The women giggled and almost ran to Jaime’s office to listen to the meeting. Joe emerged and stuck her hand out to Claire but didn’t meet her eye.

“Thank you, Claire. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. We have four green horses I understand and two from the last group that haven’t sold yet. I’m very excited.” She looked at Ruby and Claire noticed her flinch away like she feared another hug. She walked quickly down the aisle and just outside the big door she pulled her hat off and Claire saw a mane of platinum, waist-length hair tumble out and thought she would faint.

“Ruby…have you seen her hair?”
“She usually keeps it hidden but yeah I’ve seen it, and painted it. It’s really different. Um…Claire, Joe is different in another way too. She is very self-conscious about her body and usually wears big shirts like today. But… don’t know how to explain it. I guess she could be a centerfold.

“What?”

Ruby exhaled in frustration. You’ll see when she shows. The problem is she doesn’t do social very well and her parents want her to have a life she loves and be protected too. Yea know Claire?”

Claire looked sharply at Ruby, “you set all this up didn’t you. You talked to her parents and arranged for her to walk in here to interview like some kid off the street. Didn’t you Ruby!”

Claire grabbed her head and gave her a smacking kiss on the mouth followed by a whoop! “Oh, Ruby, you are the best and protected she will be. She’s perfect. Once we get Rupert, Angus, Jaime and Shawn looking after her she will be bumping into them at every turn.”

“Did you see the moving van up the street today. Looks like they finally sold the place. We should walk up tomorrow maybe and be welcoming even if it feels like they stole something from me.”

Jaime called a team meeting and everyone squeezed into the office. Rupert and Angus were excited about a rider of that quality. They would start moving horse flesh again.

“Guys, I asked for this meeting to talk about Joe and her special needs. We all need to be aware of her autism. She doesn’t like being touched or looked in the eye for that matter. She doesn’t have the same social skills as we do and it puts her at a disadvantage. She needs all of us to watch out for her. Oh, I guess she is really stacked and men bother her in public. Be her best friend please.”

The next morning Claire sat at the kitchen table reading the book of John for the second time. Sorcha ate on top of the table and when her belly was full she wanted to play with Claire’s chin. Claire picked her up and took her to the grass outside. She looked side to side and up in the air the whole time watching for predators of her little love. They played on the bed for a while and then both curled up to sleep the morning away.

Later, Claire walked into the barn and peaked in at Joe riding. She looked like she was melting with her big flannel shirt. Her face was so red Claire called her to the middle.

“Joe, take that shirt off, I’m sure you have another shirt on besides that. You are ready to overheat and pass out.”

Joe shook her head.

“If I close the arena off so no one will come in would that help.” She watched the young girl consider the option and shake her head. Claire ran to roll the big door closed and asked Rupert to put a ‘do not enter sign up.’ Claire held her hand up for Joe’s shirt and was stunned at the size of her breasts. They were obviously bound tightly but enormous.

“Joe, I’m a plastic surgeon and I could reduce your breasts for you. It’s a very common operation and I can do it for free.” If you want to be Ruby’s size, no problem. I just wanted to offer, in case you ever want to do it.”

“When?”
Claire could hear her voice shaking and looked up to see Joe crying. “When can you do it?”

“I’m not back to work for three more weeks but let’s talk to your parents and maybe schedule it as soon as I’m back.”

Later, Claire stopped at Jaime’s office and sat in his lap with Sorcha. He kissed her deeply and wrapped his arms around her.

“I’m worried ye doin more than ye should Sassenach.” He nuzzled her neck making her giggle and Sorcha bark.

“Look at you too. After a hundred years of marriage, you still carry on like teenagers.”

The voice hit Claire and she jumped off Jaime’s lap reaching for her friend. She fell into Sarah and hugged her for a whole minute. She jumped back and looked at jeans and a sweater on her friend.

“Sarah, how are you here, in those clothes?”

Jaime jumped up to embrace Sarah and then sat back down leaning back in his chair with a huge smile. He was beginning to see the bigger picture and hoped he was right. The women sat knee to knee and talked so fast he could barely understand them. He looked at Claire’s face, so excited her friend was back. He knew she loved him completely, but for the Sassenach, certain pieces of her world were required before her eyes would sparkle as they did now. The children, Jenny, Sarah, being in Scotland, and now Sorcha. He had only to look at the sparkle in her eyes to know what made her truly happy and after almost losing her he wasn’t going to wait any longer to fill her life with all those things.

Claire and Sarah left to check on the new therapy horses and let the team say hello to their favorite friend. Jaime tried to work but he could not stop worrying about Claire overdoing it. He wandered out and found them all at the outside rails talking animatedly and looking at the horses. Sarah was surrounded and everyone was smiling. He looked at Claire and felt alarm bells going off. Her face was pale and it looked like she was hanging on the rail for support.

Claire was feeling tired and could barely hold onto Sorcha when she felt powerful arms lift her up and carry her to the truck. Jaime was not entertaining an argument and his stern face suggested she rest against his chest and let him take her home. Sorcha was quite unhappy about leaving all the fun and tried to growl at Jaime but he didn’t notice. He carried Claire to their bed and went to make tea for her but she was sound asleep when he came back with it. Sorcha had passed out under Claire’s chin and opened her sleepy eyes to give Jaime a wag then she was out again.

Jaime sat and watched Claire sleep for an hour, just in case. He was bone tired and felt no joy or excitement about anything waiting for his attention at the barn. He was surprised by that so he thought about the shows, the greenies, and his new star rider. Nothing. Two of his prize dams would foal this month and bring even more notoriety to his breeding program. Foals always raised his heart rate but he wasn’t feeling it. He took a deep breath wanting to shake off his fatigue and after a half-hearted attempt he gave up and laid down next to Claire. Sorcha woke up and stretched letting Jaime pick her up and cuddle her. She had to find her own way down from his chest because he was sound asleep.

Ruby and Sarah tacked up the horses and took an afternoon ride into the foothills. Ruby caught Sarah up on what had been happening with the barn, Shawn, and her children. She asked where Sarah was staying and if she needed help finding a place. “I bought my old house and the owners
moved all that furniture out while I was finishing up at the monastery. That moving van up there is
full of my new furniture, a whole house full.” She knew Ruby like she was her own daughter and
could feel her unspoken questions.

“You must be curious about my decision to leave the monastery.” Ruby was paying close attention
and Sarah continued. “I have felt the calling since my youth and I never questioned I would serve
God in my adult life. You know what happened in Iraq when I left the church. During those years I
found a career helping people with trauma and even though I no longer prayed I could see God’s
hand in every miracle. Well, when I turned back to God I felt such happiness again, peaceful. It
made sense to live in devotion and I was happy to do it. Something felt wrong from the beginning
Ruby. Day after day of prayers, eat, chores, and sleep, the feeling in my stomach grew until it was
full-fledged panic that I woke up to each day. It felt like I was dying but there was no reason for that
so I turned my prayers to myself and asked God to show me what was wrong, to heal me from
whatever this was. I did this every day because I could do little else in my condition. My head would
fill with the miracles of recovery, some I had long since forgotten about. I would see you and Claire,
Pup, Jaime, Fred and Ginger. When I had those thoughts my heart rate dropped and I felt no panic
when I tried to return to praying for the world, the panic attacks came back. It was clear I had made a
mistake and there was only one way to fix it.”

“Where have you been? You bought these horses and your house and furniture, where have you
been staying?”

“I left the monastery this morning. I don’t want to leave the church Ruby, so I had to speak with
many people and go through some counseling so I could leave with approval you might say. I was
no longer bound by silence so I did everything from my room. This past week when my affairs were
wrapping up I was permitted to leave for the afternoon so I stopped at IKEA and bought a ton of
furniture, a clothing store for jeans and shirts and here we are. I stopped at the house before coming
to the barn and I cried with relief. I am where I belong Ruby and very grateful for the chance to
come back to this beautiful life.”

“Where will you work and find clients for the horse therapy, can you go back to the hospital?”

“I don’t know. My priority is getting Claire back on her feet and I believe I will trust the rest to God.
As luck would have it the donation I made to the hospital had to sit in an account for twelve months
and I was able to get it back. Now I see why they have this policy. The other half of the money was
given to my brother who lives in Africa. He was very happy with my decision to leave the monastery
and sent the money back. So I have time.”

Sarah and Ruby walked the horses into the barn after their ride and Sarah heard Faith calling her
name. Before her eyes could adjust to the low light of the barn she felt the hug of someone who
loves her very much. Faith helped them with the horses, asked a million questions and smiled a lot. “I
came to leave a note for Da in case he missed the one on the frig. They are sound asleep and I didn’t
want to wake them. I have a date so I gotta go.” She hugged Sarah again and waved goodbye.

Before Sarah walked home she asked Rupert to drive her to get food for Jaime and Claire. She was
overjoyed when her code blinked a green light at their front door. She left dinner on the counter and
slipped out to go home to her mess. Her beautiful mess.
Chapter 58

Jamie’s eyes flew open at the sound of the front door closing. He was on his feet and walking through the house to see if it was Faith. He wandered into the kitchen and saw the food and a note, “A special treat for Claire from the Mountain Cafe.” He smiled and took out a burger, enjoying every second of the greasy treat. Claire and Sorcha were still passed out so he walked to the barn to help lock up for the night.

Hey boss! Do ye want me to leave the event schedule as it is for this weekend or do ye want to change it? They talked briefly about putting Joe on all four greenies in stadium jumping and dressage. “She will bring the magic back Rupert but Claire is worried about her so don’t leave her alone and for Christ’s sake don’t drool when ye look at her.”

Jamie checked on his dams and gave each of them the benefit of his strong fingers to alleviate back soreness. They would both foal within a week of each other and they were close. He gave each of them sweet feed and rolled the big door closed turning most of the lights off. He looked for the blinking light on the camera in each stall and though everything was ready for the night he couldn’t leave them. He stood at the shared rail and let them rub their faces on him and investigate his pockets, put their lips on his nose and hair, and beg for heavenly scratches. He thanked them for their service and told them to be brave strong lasses for what was to come. I love ye lassies, it’s almost over for ye.

Since the start of his breeding program, he kept Shawn and Ruby with him for every stage from conception to birth. They were both very skilled in assisting delivery, they worked well with Vickie and they could turn a foal in the womb in an emergency. They would run the center when He and Claire spent summers in Scotland and he had every confidence in both of them. He was a lucky man.

Jamie stood in the driveway at home and looked down on the equestrian center, as always, his pride made his eyes sting and the sight took his breath away. How could he appreciate all he had without recalling the hard work, heat, and poverty he endured the first few years.

He could feel his hair sticking straight up from thick dried horse slobber and headed for the outdoor shower so he didn’t bring it inside. He loved the shower they had installed next to the pool house. Claire had it build to rinse the chlorine off skin and hair after a swim. Most people used it with their suit on so there were no doors or privacy, just a showerhead and a drain below and Jamie loved it. He grabbed a towel from the pool house and made his way inside.

He heard Claire’s voice praising Sorcha and was excited to get his kisses from both of them. Just before he turned the corner into the great room he heard Sarah’s voice and stopped in his tracks. He tiptoed around the back and was relieved to find the door to their bedroom unlocked. On the way to find some clothes, he glanced at his reflection and saw a fluffy white towel snug to his waist and his balls hanging down below it. “Christ, I need to buy some towels.”

Jamie leaned against the headboard and opened his laptop to search for home designs. He wanted to get inspired by aesthetics, technology, conservation… something. Claire had talked about having the kitchen central and open to the house that wrapped around it. She complained that kitchens were always tucked away and when the kids or guests were in the house they all congregated in the kitchen. If anyone else had such a thought he would find the design eventually. He looked up at his Sassenach coming through the door with rose-colored cheeks and a big smile. She was laughing and
trying to tell Jamie something about Sorcha. He watched her face and was captivated by the smile and fun that was radiating from her. She was saying something about Sorcha but he let his eyes drop to her short sundress, long thin legs, and still tiny waist. She stopped talking and laughing abruptly and stared back at him. He was too lost in looking at her and blushed fiercely when she cleared her throat.

“What’s that ye say about Sorcha?”

“Claire walked slowly to the bed knowing what had entranced Jamie. She was given strict orders not to engage in sex for six weeks but Jamie had no such orders. He might fight her, she thought, but she knew how to win. Setting Sorcha on the bed to distract Jamie for a minute or two she straddled his hips and told him how smart their dog was. She moved around a bit to stir up some friction while she commanded Sorcha to sit. The puppy was shaking the stuffing out of her favorite toy and promptly sat down with the toy hanging out of her mouth. Claire raised the roof with praise and wiggled some more. Jamie tried to be as cheerful.

“Watch this, my love…Sorcha lay down.” The puppy did not look happy about it but dropped her body to the bed and waited for praise. Jamie felt his body betray him as his erection grew under Claire’s movement. He felt his balls swell and get heavy while his erection pulsed with need. He needed to get away and concentrate on home design because this was getting painful. When Sorcha yawned and curled into his side Claire kissed him softly all over his face and neck while she pinched his nipples until he gasped. She kissed him deeply and felt his arms come around her. She felt her heart rate climb and knew she needed to make short work of this seduction before it endangered her recovery. She dropped to the side of the bed and reached for him hearing him gasp and protest. When her mouth pulled him in she watched him watch her and she used her intimate knowledge of what he liked most to make him too weak to protest. She pulled him to the stratosphere where stars are born and he growled into an intense orgasm that shook him like a rag doll.

Claire laid in Jamie’s arms and told him how much he was loved. He was her hero, her best friend, and a very sexy man. She warned him he might need Viagra when she was released to ravish him. Jamie laughed and grabbed her face to kiss it. Before the heart attack, he might throw her around a bit, tackle her, tickle her, throw her over his shoulder while he poured them a whisky. Now she was his china doll and needed kid gloves while she healed.

“That goes both ways love. When yer released for sex I imagine ye can handle a tackle or two.”

Claire laughed and let herself get lost in blue eyes, square jaw, cleft chin, high cheekbones, and red curls. Being oblivious to the world around them did little to entertain a very small dog who was not used to being ignored. “Grrrr, grrr ruf!” Claire reached behind her feeling for a toy and dangled it in front of Sorcha who grabbed it and made it her mission to kill it and gut it. Claire pulled Jamie’s face to hers for a soft kiss. “I think it’s time for a whisky and half a whisky for me.” Jamie smiled and bounced to his feet turning the monitors on as he passed them.

“Jamie! Shit! Get to the barn! One of the mares is down and it looks like the foal is hanging out of her.”

Jamie jumped in clothes and turned toward the door. He held his hand out to Claire. We can drive and ye can come home when ye get tired mo chridhe. She jumped into jeans and boots and they were off.

Claire knelt at the mares head and spoke softly to her calming her down. The foal’s head, neck, and front legs were out and the mare was exhausted. Shawn ran into the barn and joined Jamie behind
the horse. He slid his hands into the mare ready to pull gently when she had a contraction. Jamie cleared the nose and throat and bent, ready to pull with force when it was safe to do so. Claire brought a water bottle into the stall and squirted it on the parched tongue. She was seriously dehydrated and Claire grabbed her cell phone and called Vickie. When Ruby came in Claire handed her the bottle and left for supplies that Vickie ordered. Five minutes later she was running a line directly into the mare's neck and opened it up to push the fluids. On the second bag of D5W the mare lifted into the pushing position and several mighty contractions later the slippery foal was eased to the ground, too exhausted to lift its head. Ruby and Claire grabbed large towels and rubbed the little horse to stimulate circulation and dry it off. The mare stood and pushed her nose into the foal licking its face like an alarm clock. It had to get up and she was not taking no for an answer. The team waited and hoped the mares insistence would be enough. Claire gave Vickie the blow by blow and Vickie feared there may be damage to internal organs from the vise-like clamp of the uterus contracting.

“Leave it to the mare, I’m on my way.”

The mare whickered to her baby and the colt tried to raise its head. Jamie was stroking the mare's neck trying to calm her down while Shawn delivered the afterbirth. Vickie being soft-footed looked at everyone in the stall looking worried and sad.

“What’s wrong with you guys? We have a new baby.. move.”

Jamie looked at Vickie and shook his head. She was in her pajamas with irrigation boots on and squatting next to the baby. She used a portable ultrasound machine to check for damage and breathed a sigh of relief when two lungs were inflating and the other organs looked intact. She stood up and examined the mare while the others looked down at the new Colt. Jamie couldn’t stand it anymore, “why won’t he get up?” Vicky peered around from the back end of the mare and pulled her stethoscope out of her ears. “He’s lazy.”

“What?”

Claire was watching Jamie’s confusion and could not stop the giggle coming out and it promised to be a long one. Three minutes later she and Ruby were clinging to each other with tears rolling down their faces as they tried to exit the stall without falling over. Jamie continued to stare down at the colt like he was defying the laws of nature. Vickie ordered everyone out so the mare could speak to her lazy son. Twenty minutes later the colt was suckling his mother standing on his own four feet. Vickie took the birth data and pictures of his special markings. She told Jamie to get him outside in the dams paddock in two days. When she looked up at Claire she set the camera down and walked her to her truck helping her inside. Jamie was there to take her home but Vickie told him to stay in case the colt did something energetic.

Vickie loved Claire and was happy for some time with her. Claire didn’t argue much when she hit the wall and the blood drained out of her face. Vickie got her to bed and sat beside her so they could talk a little. Claire tried so hard to be conversational but her fatigue won and she slipped into her dreams.

“I watched Claire put in her code so I could lock up when I left. Just sayin I can break in and steal all your stuff now.” She listened to the colt’s heart and nodded her approval. Sir sleepy is feeling better and should be acting as expected by morning. I will send ya the birth pics and data card in a couple of days.”

“No! Ye willna let me pay for that service so I willna let ye.”
Vickie’s head dropped and her hand came up to her eyes. She sniffled and said with a quivering whisper, “are you saying I’m not a member of this family anymore?”

Jamie was horrified. “No lass I didna say that you are and we love ye.”

“Ya I know,” she giggled while turning on her heel, “See you guys next time. Shit! I have horse crap on my pajamas and my new husband is waiting for me. Oh well, I'll wipe it off and he won’t even know.” She jumped into her impressive hospital on wheels and rolled down the driveway.

“I’m goin home, ye two got this?” Shawn nodded and Ruby yawned. Jamie would not feel calm again until he pulled his sleeping wife to him, knew she was safe and went to sleep.

Jamie walked down to the barn at four o’clock on Saturday morning. There was already a bustle of activity with Angus and Rupert getting the greenies groomed and wrapped for a four-hour ride to the show. Hooves were picked and painted tails and legs wrapped in bright red, orange, yellow and blue. Each had legs and chin shaved clean and all looked dandy. Jamie checked the show schedule and loaded the tack and food. He stuffed the bins at the front of the trailer with two flakes of hay each and prepared for the fight to load. The first greenie saw the trailer and made an abrupt right turn almost pushing Angus over. Angus let the horse know that was not appreciated and Jamie rolled his eyes. The second greenie walked up the ramp like royalty but seeing he was enclosed now he panicked and tried to rear inside the trailer. Rupert hung from the halter making the horse have to work for every inch of rebellion. Finally, he walked forward and was snapped in to enjoy his breakfast.

They finally loaded the second greenie and pulled the next trailer into position. The next two were slightly easier and all were loaded without a scratch to beast or man. He watched Rupert slowly roll out of the driveway on his way to Palm Desert.

Jamie jumped in the golf cart to fetch Claire and was amazed to find her walking toward the barn. He looked up at their house and thought that was a long walk for her at this stage. They continued to the house where all of Sorcha’s supplies were waiting to be picked up.

When they hit cruising speed toward California, Sorcha climbed up on Jamie’s shoulder and watched the sights pass by on the other side of the window. When she got tired she put her head down and went to sleep. The trip got the best of Claire who was fast asleep in Jamie’s lap two hours later. Jamie drove with his two lasses sleeping on him and chuckled to himself at how this must look.

When the last horse was unloaded Claire turned around and almost ran right into Joe. She looked her up and down and saw a strikingly beautiful young girl with enormous tits that were crammed into a tight show blazer. “You look picture perfect Joe, how do you feel?” Joe shrugged her shoulders like she was asked about the weather.

“Rupert will take your horse and hand you the next one. Angus will school them in one of the pens if anyone gets buggy, okay? One of us will be with you the entire day so relax …. Christ almighty, what is wrong with you?” Claire was shouting at some man who pushed her out of the way to get in front of Joe. Claire was shocked and really pissed. Not as pissed as the huge scot who took the man out of the equation and dragged him out of sight.

Claire looked at Joe staring at the ground. “You poor kid, does that happen all the time?” Joe nodded yes and looked miserable. Jamie was back and asking if they were alright. He looked at Claire and saw the alarm in her eyes. “No worries Sassenach, she has the three of us looking out for her. There may be a lot of sore noses and black eyes but we will enjoy every lesson. You, lassie, are under the
protection of Scottish Highlanders so ye can relax, and know we have eyes on ye all the time.”

Joe nodded, still looking at the ground, but she was smiling. Let me find the boys and fill em in. The first horse is ready, Rupert will be right out.

Claire’s head was swimming from all that had just happened. She didn’t know who to worry about, Joe, her men, or the blokes that would learn a lesson today.

When Joe entered the ring for her first dressage test her hair was plated to match the horse and was stunning against the black blazer. She wasn’t five feet into the arena when the catcalls and whistles started. Claire was furious and when the offenders were not approached by show personnel she went looking for someone to chew on. Claire was well known for her wins, and extraordinary marriage to the world champion, Jamie Fraser, so when she walked toward the barn’s table she was recognized and given the respect due her.

“What kind of show are you running here? My rider entered the ring to whistles, catcalls and lewd comments shouted. No one from the show spoke to those responsible. Tell you what, I have three giant men with me today so if you don’t do something to shut that shit down I will have them take care of it. Am I clear?”

The heads nodded in agreement. When Claire walked back she saw five or six men dispatched to the bleachers and take positions among the watchers. She caught the tail end of Joe’s test and held her breath for more bullshit. The crowd clapped and several attempts at whistles or catcalls were shut down and the men were escorted off the show grounds. Well now, that is a solution, she thought.

Rupert was ready to trade horses with Joe and Claire helped with her stirrups avoiding any actual contact. One of the men who was forced to leave the show hung back at the cyclone fence and watched every move Joe made. Angus gave Joe some last-minute pointers and Claire poked his ribs and pointed at the man watching Joe. Angus smiled so big that Claire saw his dimples for the first time. She glanced that way a couple of times and saw a happy Angus wave the man in with a smile and a wink. She shuddered to think what would happen to that man but he deserved what he got so she shook it off. Joe was by far the best rider they had ever seen and none of them would let anything get in her way today.

Jamie posted Rupert and Angus on either side of Joe and picked his wife up for some much needed rest. He drove her to a nearby hotel he had rented for just this reason. Claire held tight to Sorcha and tried to argue that he shouldn’t have done such a thing. Jamie gave them a last look and they were out cold. The day was going great and Joe was walking away the winner. Jamie looked around at one point in the afternoon and nodded to Rupert and Angus. Thirty seconds later his head whipped back and he saw the guys running. Where was Joe? Rupert ran his heart out and found Joe pressed into a horse while some idiot was doing his best to coax her out. Rupert walked up behind him and drove his head into a wood beam like it was an afterthought. The man was holding his head and screaming for help. Rupert got in his face and told him he was a pussy to scream like that. He apologized for destroying the man's voice box and raised his elbow for a vicious strike. The man screamed and grabbed his neck running away without looking back.

“I hope that doesna upset ye lass. I'm just teaching the lad some manners, okay?” Rupert saw her smiling at the ground and her head nod just a little. “Ye need to drag one of us with ye when ye need to wander. Is that a deal lass?” She nodded again.

When Jamie and Angus caught up to Rupert he was leading Joe’s next horse out and she was walking close behind him. She looked at the ground like always but would look up constantly and
quicken her step if he got too far ahead. As the day wore on Joe walked closer to Rupert until she walked next to him.

Joe’s parents showed up to watch the stadium jumping and Jamie groaned inwardly and stuck his hand out to say hello. Joe walked up with Rupert and said hello like they were strangers then she turned on her heel and they walked toward the pen where Angus was warming up her first horse. Before she was called Angus ran out with a towel soaked in shine and rubbed it all over the horse coming to a screaming halt at her boots. “Sorry, lassie.” Rupert took the towel and rubbed her boots to a high shine. “There ye go, lass, well turned out ye are.” An imperceptible nod from Joe and she entered the ring. Angus was speechless for the first time in his life. Jamie joined them when her round started and all three of them flexed forward for every jump. She won and she won and she won.

Her parents said goodbye, white-faced and trembling, but smiled and waved. Joe stayed close to Rupert and didn’t look at them when they left. Jamie answered his phone and heard his bride yawning and asking for a ride back to the show. The day was putting them back in the black with the greenies and Jamie was over the moon. He looked at Joe standing near Rupert and wondered what was going on there. Claire would know what to do and he sprinted to his truck to bring her back.

Claire was really struggling with the waking state and she tried to keep her eyes wide open but failed miserably. She insisted on going back for Joe’s last ride and Jamie helped her into the truck. When they pulled onto the road Claire shrieked she forgot Sorcha. Hearing her name the puppy licked Claire’s chin and she was so happy she had not forgotten her. Jamie saw her red cheeks and pressed her forehead to his cheek. He knew that meant thank you for understanding and I love you. When Jamie filled her in on Joe’s behavior toward Rupert she dialed Sarah to get an expert opinion. Claire held the phone to her ear as she slipped back into her slumber. Jamie took her phone and turned the speaker on while Claire blushed with embarrassment.

“There are differing degrees with autism, sometimes a functional autist will have a career and live independently. Forming bonds that are regarded as romantic are not that uncommon. Neither is marriage.”

“Sarah, I’m concerned about a growing closeness between Joe and Rupert. He is twice her age and I would bet my life this is coming from Joe.”

“There is a big age difference, that’s true. I’m afraid you will have to just watch what happens. If this is a big negative for Rupert it may a good time to visit his mother in Scotland. If Joe has connected with him it may be the only way to steer her away.”

“Rupert’s mam died a few months ago Sarah. It guts him when someone mentions her name and I doubt he wants to endure a trip to Scotland at this point. What am I going to do?”

“Would it be so terrible to do nothing?”

“Probably.”

Happiness is knowing when you have no control. Jamie, you have no control with how they feel about each other so pray and let it go.

“Love to all, over and out.” Click.
Jamie answered another call and pulled Claire closer to him as he negotiated the last horse to sell that day. Claire was starting to feel more awake but still looked frantically for Sorcha about every five minutes.

When they were leaving for the night, Joe patted Rupert’s shoulder and thanked him for teaching that man a lesson. Rupert felt his heart brake for this poor girl. Gifted with the beauty of a goddess and locked away in her affliction. “From now on lass, ye are part of the Fraser family, and ye only have to look over yer shoulder and one of us will be there, always.” He walked her to her car and pulled the seatbelt out for her and smiled. He thought she might have looked at his smile but decided not.

Joe watched Rupert in her rearview mirror. He never took his eyes off her and she felt tingles inside about him. She wanted to be near him all the time, every day and lacked the social understanding to prepare herself for push back about it.

Jamie felt his mojo coming back. With Claire in his lap and Sorcha asleep on his shoulder, he was invincible and he would not repeat mistakes of his past. In hindsight, he had so little time to love her before Ian was born, so many health issues after his birth. Once he was healthy Faith came along and his big gamble paid off sending them careening into the fast lane. It was a blur after that. He remembered snippets of their life together like when Ian left to live full time in Scotland. He felt tears at the memory of Ian holding onto his mother at the airport, begging her to move to Scotland so they could be together. The memory was painful but Ian was happy there. He belonged there and followed in his father’s footsteps choosing to chase his dreams in another country. Jamie’s mind went back to holding his own mother and saying goodbye. Seeing Jenny’s pain and hugging her to him praying she would learn to forgive him. The look in da’s eyes when they shook hands and he pulled Jamie to him. Da knew he had a dream to chase just like he knew Ian had to. He missed them so much and hoped they grew to understand why he had to stay.

It was time for him and Claire to find each other again, like in the beginning. He wanted to build her dream house where she would be healthy and loved and close to Ian half the year. She wanted to study the medicinal herbs and he would give her the garden of her dreams. He would find two horses that were Jag and Donus in spirit and they will ride into the Highland hills and remember all the hearts that touched their lives and left a lasting memory. Mostly, they would celebrate each other and a never-ending love. Through his tears, Jamie saw the exit to Ironwood drive and he felt enormous peace that this wacky girl in his lap loved him as fiercely as the day he married her.

When they were finally in bed wrapped in each other’s arms he told her his surprise.

“Sassenach.”

“Yes, love.”

“We’re spendin the summer in Scotland. We leave in two months. It’s time to get the house started.”

She was climbing on him looking for skin to kiss, saying “I love you, and thank you, I love you, can’t wait, I love you, our dreams come true, I love you.” Jamie chuckled at her happiness and wrapped her up in his arms.

“If ye dinna remember this tomorrow I willna be unhappy. I can hear yer happiness and get yer kisses and I love you’s all over again. So sleep mo chridhe, and forget so I can tell ye again tomorrow.
Chapter 59

Claire reached for her briefcase and smiled at Jamie. He looked at her face and felt an overwhelming need to protect her.

“Sassenach, it’s only been six weeks, are ye sure yer ready to go back to work lass?”

She smiled at him and touched his cheek. “I’m ready, although a bit worried about Sorcha. Do you think she will be alright alone today?”

“I have coordinated with Faith so one of us will be here with her all day. She’ll be fine love.”

Claire kissed her husband and picked up Sorcha kissing her over and over. “Be a good girl and we will walk in the foothills tonight, okay?”

The tiny puppy was so excited about an adventure with Claire she paid no attention. “Well, alright, I better go.” When the door closed behind Claire Jamie looked at Sorcha and feigned excitement about a walk. He grabbed her leash and tried to snap it on but Sorcha sat down with her back to him. He tried several times only to have her move away keeping her back to him. “Come on lass, let’s go have a walk.”

Little Sorcha started to cry. Quietly at first, building to an alarming volume making Jamie feel fearful for her. He paced back and forth not knowing what to do as Sorcha cried her heart out. Finally, Jamie called Claire as she was pulling into the parking lot. She didn’t turn the truck off but pulled out and headed for home. Claire realized she had bonded so strongly with Sorcha, keeping her next to her every minute of the day, even dropping her in her trench coat pocket at the grocery store. What did she think would happen?

Claire rushed into the house and there was Sorcha, laying on her paws with her toys all around her, Jamie sitting on the couch looking worried. Sorcha was making quite a show of her disappointment, so much so she hadn’t heard Claire’s truck drive up. Claire picked her up and Sorcha looked up at her with so much love. Claire went into the bedroom and put on a lab coat and dropped her into the big pocket. “Perfect fit.”

Jamie pulled Claire into his arms and kissed her. I’m sorry Sassenach, I failed as a baby sitter. She hugged him tightly and smiled at him. “It’s okay, she fits just right.” Claire scooped up her bed and some toys, kissed Jamie, and left again for work.

Sorcha settled into her bed under Claire’s desk and snuggled with one of her toys. Throughout the day, she was quiet and sleepy until Claire left for the examination room to see a patient. Within a few minutes, she could hear Sorcha wailing from her office. If Joe or Gail tried to go in and comfort her she would growl and bark at them until they left. Claire looked down at her young patient who was very disfigured from a burn and in a great deal of pain. “I am sorry,” looking at the mother. “I will be right back.” She scooped Sorcha up and dropped her in her lab coat pocket, then returned to her patient. The little girl was very afraid to let Claire take her bandages off and started to cry in fear. Little Sorcha stuck her nose up and sniffed the air wondering what the commotion was about. Sorcha’s head popped out of Claire’s pocket and the little girl stopped crying instantly. Sorcha was enchanted with the child and wanted her attention. Grrrrr ruf! Grrrrr.

Claire froze and then shushed Sorcha but the puppy was not interested in being quiet so she growled...
some more. The little girl laughed and Claire decided to throw caution to the wind. She picked the
girl up and sat her on the examination table then reached for Sorcha and put her on the table as well.
The next ten minutes was nothing short of a miracle. Little Sorcha was very interested in the patient
and pranced and licked and played until both patient and mother were under her spell. Claire
completed her examination with no fuss and no more tears. Sorcha had curled up in the little girl’s
lap until she was dropped back into Claire’s pocket.

The majority of Claire’s patients were children and Sorcha became very instrumental in the healing
process. Once she stole their hearts with her prancing and antics she would lay in their laps until
Claire pulled her back to a pocket. Claire and Sorcha were a team dedicated to healing child burn
victims and they both worked very hard. The biggest hurdle was the sterile operating room where
Sorcha could not go. The scrub room had a wall to wall window that looked directly at the surgical
team and Claire prayed it would be enough. She locked Sorcha into her carrier with a soft blanket
and lots of her toys and then pushed it up against the window. Ten minutes into the procedure she
remembered the puppy and her eyes shot up at a tiny dog with her nose pressed against the grill of
her carrier eyes glued to Claire and quiet as a church mouse.

A mother waited nervously in an exam room with her five-year-old son who was burned when a
speed boat caught fire. The child’s back had third-degree burns and his pain required high doses of
pain killers throughout the day. The mother heard the sound of high heels clacking toward them and
saw the door open. Claire stepped in with a big smile and a tiny ball of fur was right behind her.
Claire said nothing about her abnormal entrance and engaged the mother in reviewing the medical
history and accident. Meanwhile, the patient who was scared shitless, knowing excruciating pain was
close at hand, smiled at Sorcha who was trying to get his attention. Claire pretended not to notice.
When it was time to examine the child she scooped Sorcha up to the exam table and the child’s
attention was totally on the puppy.

Sorcha would try to lick the child’s face making him laugh while Claire removed the bandages and
completed her exam. With the hard part over, applying the soothing balm and fresh bandages was
almost pain-free, and easily tolerated.

Sorcha was just as helpful at the hospital when Claire did her rounds. If the child was well enough
she would drop Sorcha on the bed to play or cuddle while she did her examination. Whenever she
had the time she would take her up to the pediatric cancer unit and facilitate her magic on the sickest
of kids.

Claire was on a short day schedule while she built her strength back up and by three o’clock each
afternoon she and Sorcha were fast asleep in bed until Jamie came home. Jamie ran his hand down
her arm and then her leg. He was so hungry for her he could not stop himself. He cuddled into her
back and unbuttoned her blouse letting his hand touch her soft skin. She rolled toward him and held
his face and then she kissed him a promise, she was ready and wanted him right now. The kissing
deepened and their tongues drove the other into the intensity expected when they hadn’t touched for
so long. Claire was so responsive to his touch and her heart was ramming in her chest. When Jamie
took her nipple in his mouth he noticed how hard she was breathing and felt a jolt of panic as his
body went rigid.

“Breathe Sassenach.” He held her cheek, “just breathe mo chridhe.”

Claire pulled Jamie to her and kissed his unresponsive lips. Her eyes opened and she looked at his
rigid body and worried expression. He just kept telling her to breathe and holding her cheek. Claire
noticed her heart ramming and the slow return to normalcy once the touching stopped. Jamie got up
to make dinner for them and Claire leaned against the headboard waiting for her heart to slow. It was
the first time she wondered if recovery was even possible. A dark mood slipped into her head and slowly filled her body with dread.

Jaime came into the bedroom with two plates of omelets, potatoes, and meatless sausage and pulled Claire’s bed table to her.

“What is it Sassenach?” He knew and felt his heart brake for his vibrant, athletic wife who had lived almost fifty years like a superhero. She never second-guessed her ability, her strength, or endurance. She never hesitated to swing up on a giant warmblood who was besting their rider, and Angus. Her courage came from a belief in herself and her abilities. Now with a hand to her chest, she seemed to shrink in front of his eyes. It was too much for Jamie and he pushed back on the emotion that was choking him. Come what may he would be the hero she needed.

“I have cooked ye my specialty Sassenach and ye won’t touch yer food. I’m feelin unappreciated and may never cook again if ye don’t take a bite and make her wee noises about how good it is.”

Claire looked up at him with wide eyes and put a fork full of food in her mouth.

“Those eggs are full of protein and delicious because they come from yer wee chickens. Protein rebuilds muscle and potatoes give ye energy. I ken because you told me mo chridhe and if ye eat all yer plate we can get ice cream later.”

Claire tried to smile but Jamie could see the gears grinding in her head. He didn’t like where this was going so he swallowed the remainder of his meal and sat next to his love with his laptop. He flipped through the house designs, stopping at the ones she liked to look closer. He pulled her to Lallybroch with specific references like a canning counter in the laundry room and the best exposure for the garden. Claire slowly got more interested in the designs and eating as their discussion became more specific and productive. Jamie started to relax as he felt her come back to the present and shake the fear.

“I’ve decided to build a new barn next to the house. I intend to find two horses for us that will be fine animals, too good for that dilapidated outbuilding they have now. He pulled up his bookmarks for barn construction and showed her the innovative designs that in lessened the physical labor required to maintain an animal housing and new technology in stall-lining that lessened pressure on the hooves and pressure points when the horse laid down. Windows that let the horse watch the day outside of the stall and water catching devices that trapped the water coming off the roof in heavy rain that minimized the mud after storms. Claire was excited about his suggestions so they made a night of it and Jamie didn’t budge from her side until sleep pulled them both to their dreams.

When Claire and Sorcha left for work the next day Jamie prepared for his last group of greenies to be delivered. There were maybe eight weeks before the heat settled upon the valley again and they would bid the team farewell for three months. He bought six greenies feeling bolstered by Joe’s skill. He sat in his office chewing a pencil and rocking in his squeaky chair. He was still emotional about the prior night and Claire’s depression. She had her six-week exam this week and he cringed at the thought of bad news. He heard Rupert whistle for him and he felt ancient as he stood up and walked outside to meet his new horses. They were led to the outside arena where Rupert walked them while Angus studied their gates and musculoskeletal movement. Jamie watched for five minutes from the big door and then lost interest. He wasn’t feeling it today and looked at his watch wanting the day move a little quicker.

Ruby watched Jamie struggle with undisclosed emotions and she worried about him and Claire. Now that Claire was back to work she hardly saw her, and Jamie seemed a shadow of his former
self. She didn’t know what was happening with them but she felt sad and lonely, for what, she didn’t
know. When chores were done she walked up to hang out with Sarah and shared her feelings as best
she could.

“Claire was supposed to recover fully but nothing is like it was and Jamie seems like he doesn’t care
about the barn anymore. I have less and less energy to tackle the day, not like I used to. I don’t get it,
Sarah. I just want things to be normal again.”

Sarah looked at Ruby with such compassion and knew how devastating it was to face your own
mortality. She and Claire were five years apart in age and Claire’s poor health provided a window to
Ruby’s own demise. Sweet Ruby was grieving the loss of youth and exuberance that catapulted the
barn into a success seen by few in this world. Rather than adjust to the changes in Jamie and Claire,
she expected them to snap back to the warriors they once were. If she couldn’t learn to embrace the
changes that age imposes her happiness would wane and leave her disenchanted with life.

“Ruby, I think it’s time to ask a favor of you. I have considered this for a long time, even before I
left. It’s something I want to do for my friend. I know it will cost me a king’s ransom so I’m prepared
for that.”

Ruby looked at Sarah like she was speaking Greek.

Sarah walked away and returned with a magazine and a photograph and laid them on the table. The
magazine featured Jamie the year he won Europe. He held his helmet in the air and the reins of his
mighty horse in the other hand beaming a smile that brightened the world he now ruled. He was
surrounded by crowded grandstands and greenery everywhere the enormous stadium jumps with all
the colors and flags could be seen in the background. He was the king of his sport, the best in the
world, and his monumental achievement played across his face. Ruby held the magazine and was
spellbound by the picture. She picked up the photograph of Claire and Jag snapped when they were
high in the air clearing a huge jump on the eventing field. They were suspended six feet off the
ground. Jag was tucked up tight, neck extended, ears forward and Claire’s body was up off the
saddle in perfect sync with Jag, her eyes forward toward the next obstacle and a smile on her face. It
was an incredible moment in time for both of them and her biggest win.

Ruby’s tears gushed as she touched the dynamic duo in the picture. Sarah thought her heart would
stop watching her and struggled to steady herself and show the brave face she expected of Ruby.

“I want them painted Ruby, to show all the emotions of the moment, the greatest triumph for each of
them, to hang in the barn and inspire all the competitors who come with their own dreams of victory.
A tribute to the champions,” she said quietly.

Ruby stared at the pictures, wiping her tears on her sleeve, and nodded her head.

“I know this requires months of work Ruby and I’m willing to pay one thousand each.”

Ruby’s head snapped up, “dollars?”

“Yes Ruby, dollars.”

Ruby looked like she might faint at the offer. “I will do it, but I want no money Sarah, just your help
and a quiet place to work, like my old room?”

“Of course. It would be an honor and so much fun to have you here again. Remember how I would
hang out when you were painting and we would talk for hours? I can’t wait to do that again.”

Ruby hugged Sarah and walked back to the barn stopping at home to tuck the originals away safely. She had a faster gait and felt energy pouring into her. She felt a decade younger when she walked into the barn.

Several days later, Claire looked out her wall of windows as the first rays of sunlight hit the majestic mountains. The view could pull every ounce of stress out of her body most days, but it wasn’t working today. Three hours from now she would hear the results of her follow up exam and she wasn’t ready for it. She had locked her fears in her head for Jamie’s sake where they festered and grew, stealing all joy from her days, and whispering to her about fragility and death. She was ready to come apart and suddenly needed the feel of Jamie’s arms around her.

Claire slid into bed and felt Jamie cuddle her instantly. He kissed her cheek and held her tight knowing she must be scared shitless of what would be revealed today. He pleaded with himself, on his knees, to lose the sexual urgency that plagued him every morning keeping him at a distance from her. The throbbing of his balls and erection mocked his hope and when he heard her breathing deepen he got up to shower and relieve himself of one nuisance erection.

Jamie spooned Claire stroking her arm and holding her. Sorcha emerged from under the covers and walked toward Jamie yawning. She pressed her head against his arm with sleepy eyes until he lifted it letting her cuddle in the warm space between his chest and Claire’s back. She was fast asleep within minutes and Jamie felt the happy protectiveness of this family knot. He drifted to sleep and heard his father say “yer a braw son laddie now buck up!” His eyes flew open and his body jerked looking around expecting to see his da standing behind him. He took a deep breath and felt goosebumps race up his arms. Glancing at the clock he turned the alarm off and gave his wife a soft wake up call to avoid the shrill adrenalin pumping alarm that was seconds from blasting them.

“It’s time to get up love.” He pressed his face into her hair and felt her take a deep breath. She felt his warm hand caress her arm and leg and coax her awake.

“Where is Sorcha?”

“squeezed between us at the moment.”

Claire laughed and got up, heading for the shower. Jamie washed her hair and the aromatherapy shampoo infused them with energy. He tipped her head to rinse the soap off and kissed her feeling all of his love.

Claire held Jamie’s hand while they waited for the results of her examination. She heard her name called and walked with courage until she was seated with Jamie across the expanse of her cardiologist’s desk. He was reading test results and finally looked up and smiled at them like he forgot they were there.

“Well Claire, if we had a poster child for recovery from a heart attack it would be you. Of course, your general health and young age play heavily in your recovery, your test results would give any heart patient hope. I couldn’t be happier.” He looked up at Claire showing his enthusiasm. “I am releasing you to the life you choose to live without restriction.”

Claire stared at the doctor like he had examined the wrong person by mistake and waited for the other shoe to fall. “I don’t understand.”
The doctor regarded her for a long minute over his reading glasses, then he looked at Jamie’s stricken face. He walked around his desk and sat in the chair next to Claire. Taking her hands in his he look into her magnificent eyes. “I’m saying you are fine and have made a full recovery. You need to watch your diet and eat low cholesterol foods, binging on steak no more than twice per month, just to avoid a build-up of plaque that will cause problems in another twenty years.

Claire was resistant. So sure she would live a restrictive life and wither away, her mind was not open to this unexpected news.

“It is not uncommon to feel depression and fear after a heart attack Claire and the mind is a powerful manipulator. Hopefully, you have resumed your sexual activities as well as work and whatever it is you do with horses.” He looked at her with raised eyebrows and watched her shake her head side to side. “Well, it’s time that you do because there is no pathology to restrict you.”

“How can you say that? I am asleep all but six or seven hours a day.”

“You body has been healing from great trauma and sleep is expected for two weeks after surgery. You are four weeks behind and you need to push yourself now. Push through the fatigue and work for it, Claire. Work for your health, your strength, your old life. Your heart condition is based on genetics, not age. It will not shorten your life unless you stop trying. I can’t overstress the importance of taking your life back. You know what that entails. Do you want it or don’t you?”

Jamie closed his eyes and nodded, feeling like someone just removed a two-ton anchor from his neck. He smiled and shook the doctor’s hand, “another thirty years ye say? Thank Christ,” he whispered and steered Claire to the exit of their nightmare and sunshine of their future.

He watched Claire’s face as they made their way home and saw the acceptance of her own health and future. He rolled to a stoplight on Ironwood and looked at his love.

“Sassenach, this is the best…”

She fused her mouth to his and held onto his neck as she crawled into his lap and kissed him with abandon. Jamie kissed her back as well as he could while negotiating the road to their home. Claire’s kisses were celebratory, life-giving, and turned serious and needy as they drove into the driveway. She could not get enough of Jamie’s mouth spurred ever higher by his newly unshackled hands. They crashed into the front door pulling pieces of clothing off each other and falling into bed. Jamie was losing his mind kissing and sucking every inch of her.

“Come here love, I cannot wait another second.”

Jamie slid into his wife and felt the wave wash over him. He moved slowly, watching Claire’s face for pain and seeing her dark lusty eyes begging him to let go.

“Christ Claire, I love ye so much it feels like my heart will burst with it. Are ye alright mo chridhe.”

“No, I need to come.”

Jaime pulled her bud into his mouth and sucked lightly while his teasing tongue flicked viciously for a few seconds and his fingers made her back arch and moan his name. The next time he flicked her she went careening into the erotic wind that pulled her up and let her drift in the intensity of her release.
Jamie watched her face as she drifted back saying his name and reaching for him. He watched her beautiful eyes open and she whispered, “Will you touch me deep inside love?” He moved between her legs and watched her as he touched her deep inside feeling the electricity sting his balls and shoot into his groin until it was painful. He whispered “I love ye lass,” and let it go feeling his orgasm shake him from head to toe. Claire wrapped her arms and legs around him and held his body while he jerked and panted in the exquisite release. “My love,” she whispered in his ear.

Jamie dozed until he felt a little body wriggle away from him and get up. He grabbed her hand pulling her back to the bed and pushed her back.

“Where do ye think yer goin sweet lass?”

Claire giggled and held his cheeks, “I need to get Sorcha from Sarah’s. I’m sure she is driving her crazy with the wailing.” You should stay right here and be careful not to fall into any clothes. I will be right back. She kissed his face lightly a dozen times and he slipped away.

Claire opened the door to the giggles of girls and it filled her up with happiness. Sorcha shot to her feet with a vibrating tail turning inside out to be picked up. Ruby and Sarah were on the floor looking at cookbooks for the perfect recipe for Shawn’s birthday dinner. Claire sat on the couch and joined the conversation for a minute or two and got more and more quiet.

“Ruby, I think we should walk Claire home, do you agree?”

Claire was sound asleep with Sorcha in her lap. Her two closest friends got her back home with minimal wakefulness. Claire pulled her clothes off and melted into bed feeling Jaime’s arms pull her to him. Later they looked at more home designs, ate Chinese take out, watched a movie on Netflix and fell asleep in each other's arms.

Claire was slowly aware of a pounding that caught her sleepy attention. She looked at the sun-filled bedroom and guessed it was mid-morning on this lovely Saturday. She stretched and felt soft fur curl up under her chin. She could have easily drifted back except that pounding was making her curious. She brushed her teeth and pulled her short robe on walking through the house to find the noise. She followed the sound to the back Arcadia doors and was rooted there watching Jamie.

He drove a pointed shovel into the ground with enormous force making his muscles bulge and glisten with sweat. His back was to her so she was free to stare at his body and admire his chiseled physique. His shorts hung low on his hips held up only by the size of his muscular butt. When he walked around the hole he was digging Claire felt instantly aroused at the sight of him. His shorts exposed the top of his penis pressed against his body. With each breath, she raised her head hoping to see the shorts fall to the ground exposing his entire statuesque form. She opened her mouth to breathe and stepped outside. Jamie looked up and smiled until he saw her smoldering eyes. He watched her walk to the double lounge and lay on her back, never taking her eyes off him. They both knew Faith was gone for the weekend and Jamie was starving for her again. He continued digging and watching Claire watch him. He stuck the shovel point into the hard dirt and jumped on it driving it into the ground about six inches making his thighs bulge.

Claire lifted one bent knee captivating Jamie’s attention and causing him to strain his neck to see between her naked legs. She slipped her robe off her shoulders and laid on the lounge, naked, still watching him.

“Open yer legs Sassenach…for the love of Christ, let me see ye.”
She regarded him silently and waited while he tried to see past her thigh. After several silent minutes, she opened her legs and watched Jamie’s eyes feast on her core. “Christ lass, that was a bold move and one I will no hesitate to act on.”

“Keep digging. I want to look at you.”

The sound of her voice made the hair on his neck stand up. He watched her chest lift with her rapid breathing and had to have her warm body under him. The shovel fell sideways and he looked down at her body feeling his cock press against his shorts. “Yer a wee temptress this morning Sassenach and I want ye.”

“What is it you want Jamie.” She pressed her fingers to her fold exposing her bud and watching his struggle. She moved her finger across it and gasped pulling a growl out of Jamie. His hands came down on her hips and turned her over pushing her legs apart. He ran his hand down her back and butt slipping his finger into her wetness and moaning. Jaime twisted the button on his cutoffs to let them fall the ground. Lowering his body to hers he stopped just inches above her, cocking his head to the side to verify the unbelievable, his dearest love was sound asleep.

Jaime covered his wife with his big robe to keep her warm in the outside breeze. He looked down at her face, so unguarded in sleep. “There’s a new sheriff in yer life lass, and he will push ye back to health, like it or not.”
Chapter 60

Claire’s eyes opened to the sound of Sorcha barking and scratching at the arcadia door. She moved her head and felt a paper note pinned to Jamie’s robe that was now covering her. She blinked her eyes and tried to focus.

My lovely Sassenach,
You invited me to a party for two and fell asleep. I will walk with a troubled gait today so please come to the barn and lend a hand, if you will. I will collect what was promised, worry not.
JF

Claire dressed and walked to the barn, Sorcha in hand, expecting a quiet Saturday. It was anything but. Joe was jumping in the arena with Angus and two horses were tacked up and tied to the arena rail. Inside, Rupert was getting another greenie ready and Claire looked around like everyone had gone mad.

“Since when do you work on Saturdays when there’s no show Rupert?”

“Well, since Jamie bought six greenies just before we go on summer schedule. We got to get them ready to show right away.”

“There are two horses tied to the rail outside. What do you intend to do with that one?”

Rupert shrugged his shoulders, “Jaime’s orders.” He led the tacked horse past her on the way outside.

“Claire!” Ruby came around the corner and hugged Claire pulling Sorcha into her arms and making a fuss over her while she drifted down the aisle.

“Ah, Sassenach, it’s a beautiful day, care to watch the greenies?” He pulled her into him and led her outside. “Christ, look at all these horses tacked up and waitin for their workout, damn, what to do. Yer gonna have to take one mo chridhe. Go get yer wee chaps on and pick one.”

Claire looked at Jamie like he had lost his mind. “Me?”

“Aye, and hurry, we need to get these guys to the show next weekend, much to do.” He wasn’t joking and his constant gaze made her move her feet.

Claire zipped her chaps up and hooked them to her belt loops complaining under her breath the whole time. She was a little shocked to be called to duty so soon but in her stomach, she felt excitement which just got bigger until she felt the leather of the saddle between her legs and the reins between her fingers. Rupert appeared out of nowhere and lead her horse into the arena.

“Hey, lassie, good to see ye on a horse again,” Angus shouted. Warm the wee devil up and I’ll watch for problems.”

Just like that, she fell into a long-practiced routine with Angus. Knowing exactly what he wanted, she put the horse through his paces. Jaime watched from the big door and smiled at his wife’s glowing face. It was worth all the phone calls this morning to get the team in position, with a glut of horses, Ruby to take Sorcha, and the ever-faithful Rupert and Angus playing their part perfectly. Claire was doing flying lead changes like she never left. Jamie made a mental note; Step one, legs,
done, although she might not walk for a few days. Jamie came out three more times over the next few hours as Claire traded horses and jumped a few fences. When he saw the fatigue set in on her face he raised his arm to call her to center arena.

Claire was smiling as Jamie pulled her from the saddle. She giggled about rubber legs and he supported her as they walked out of the arena. He pulled her toward the driveway and Claire looked around frantically for Ruby. Jamie whistled for her and Sorcha was handed over in under a minute. The puppy wiggled and yipped, so happy to see Claire.

“Ah, I forgot somethin Sassenach, keep walkin and I will catch up. Jamie turned back and jogged toward the barn. The “glut” of horses already had tack pulled off and a mound of hay in their stalls for lunch. Angus came around a corner muttering about a date and peered around to see Claire halfway up the hill toward home. Angus sprinted to his truck and left quickly for home. Jamie shook his head and laughed at the speed they had put everything back to a normal Saturday and vanished to enjoy their free time. There was not a team member in sight so he ran to catch up with Claire.

By mid-afternoon, Claire’s inner thighs had locked up and each step pulled a wince from her. Jamie went back to digging his hole outside and she slipped into a hot bath. While she soaked, Jamie came in naked and slick with sweat, talking about the new tree he planted before getting in the shower. She could barely keep up with the details of the day and marveled at how much she used to do. Jamie sat beside the bath in fresh jeans and a cotton t-shirt and offered to release her muscles if she needed his help. She agreed and closed her eyes when his strong hand gripped her muscle deep in her groin and pulled slowly. He took his time and distracted her with barn news and gossip while he watched her face register relief, then pleasure, then arousal. He reached for the other thigh and let his hand bump her core accidentally while he found the muscle. He saw her mouth open to allow a larger breath and her breasts bobbed in the water enticingly. When he finished the second leg he brushed his thumb against her heat and whispered her name.

“Sassenach, will ye have me?” She gasped when his thumb pushed into her and fingers wrapped around her bud. He pulled her to her feet and wrapped huge towels around her before carrying her to their bed. “I’m so proud of you mo chridhe”, he whispered in her ear, “I’m so in love with ye lass and I need ye.” Jamie pulled his clothes off and Claire opened her legs in invitation. He kissed her over and over, first softly then more needy and deep. Claire was panting when he slid her legs over his shoulders and claimed her body. Always watching her face for push back or pain, he saw only arousal and then complete abandon. Claire’s body pulled Jamie into his release and she held him close while he drifted back.

“Sleep love. Ye’ve earned yer rest and I am right beside ye.” A dozen kisses on her chin and neck provided a single option, surrender to the dreams. So she did.

Jamie spent his quiet time in the study researching post bypass fitness in athletes. He was surprised to read how many athletes had suffered from heart disease and their fight back to fitness. He read case histories and testimonies of successful regimens and a willing spirit. He kept reading until he found the stories of chronic fatigue, depression, and giving up. It was heartbreaking to read the raw testimonials that let him peer into Claire’s secret battle. One story gripped his heart so tight it hurt. A professional ballerina, who retired from the stage to run a hugely popular ballet school in New York. Her heart attack and bypass were so devastating to her emotionally that she took to her bed and almost lost the school she loved. Her description of the fear and weeks of isolation pushed Jamie to fight his tears, but her decision to fight for her life had him on the edge of his seat, mentally pulling for her to make it back. She described the brutality of ballet with bleeding feet and knots in her leg muscles that gripped her with pain for days on end. Her life long friend and trainer turning a deaf ear to her crying and pleading to stop. Her victorious return to the stage for an exhibition dance at a
celebration of the arts one year later.

Jamie jumped out of his chair with a pounding heart and paced his study feeling trapped in a hateful scenario. He knew that Claire would return to her bed and sleep away her joy and ambition if he let her. His head filled with memories of his ultimatum that Jag would be sold if she didn’t conquer her fear on the field. She believed it was her last ride with Jag because he pushed her to take control or lose him. After all these years he still remembered her gut-wrenching sobs into Jag’s neck. He saw her hateful eyes as they galloped away on a hail-Mary ride that changed her life and Jag’s. He didn’t have it in him anymore. He couldn’t do it. Why wouldn’t she?

Jamie needed fresh air and space so he walked to his favorite path into the mountain and shut his brain down for a while. The steep incline pushed his heart rate up and his leg muscles strained with the effort but he pushed on. Ten minutes into his climb he was feeling great and he pushed harder. He kept up this pace for twenty minutes and finally slowed down to catch his breath. He was high enough to view the huge valley below, a sight he never got tired of. He sat on a rock and thought about Claire. He was fifty-two years old and still had forty years to live if he was lucky. What would his life be like without Claire? He thought of Ruby’s picture of their future at Lallybroch. When Claire’s image disappeared, so did his. He wouldn’t build a house in Scotland, he would work day and night to keep ahead of his loneliness for her.

“God Damnit lass, why won’t ye try, why do I have to be the prick who pulls ye outta bed and forces ye to the treadmill.” He shook his head, “please Claire, dinna make me do this.”

He took a deep breath and pushed off the rock to walk back down the mountain. A noise nearby stopped him dead in his tracks and raised the hair on his neck. He turned around searching for the animal responsible, expecting to find a dog that was lost. He knew it was close so he sat back down on the rock and waited. Speaking quietly as he did to the horses he talked about the weather, warm food, cold water, and finding it’s home. The crying started again and he raised his eyes slowly looking for the poor thing.

“I canna see ye. I promise to help ye if ye show yerself. I’ll no hurt ye so come out.” He heard the whimpering again and looked quickly in that direction. “Christ almighty! Where the devil did you come from?” Jamie knew there was stress in his voice and pushed down on his shock so he might help the animal. It looked like a wolf pressed under a rock but there were no wolves in these mountains. His leg was clearly broken and he couldn’t stand up.

“Well, laddie, this is a fine mess ye got into. Ye need help or death will come for ye. It’s a miracle the coyotes havna got ye already. So, that means I must carry ye down the mountain after I stabilize yer leg. That’s a fair amount of contact and I don’t want to get bit, and I don’t want to hurt ye. If I leave ye to get help it might be too late to save ye. So, what’s it gonna be lad?”

Jamie inched closer and could see the animals bones under his fur. He was emaciated and Jamie’s heart broke. “I canna leave ye here so I’m gonna tie her broken leg to yer chest and then pick ye up. But first, let’s pray.” Jamie dropped his head and pleaded with God that he would not be bitten by a rabid wolf while he was doing an errand of mercy. He pulled his shirt off and ripped the seams until he created a sling. A deep breath for courage and he walked to the wolf and sat down on the ground, in easy biting distance. He closed his eyes and talked about the Highlands describing the glens and lavender fields and every shade of green under a blue sky. There was love in his voice that calmed the poor animal and he laid his head on Jamie’s shirt that was put close to his head.

Jamie’s soft confident voice was just above a whisper, “here we go, laddie.” Jamie moved slowly but showed no hesitation or fear when he pulled the sling under the wounded leg and tied it around his
neck. He ran his hand down the wolf’s back and wondered how he could have survived in his starved condition. As carefully as possible he lifted the animal to his chest and exhaled with relief. The wolf was very light and did not fight Jamie’s grip.

“Yer a good lad so just relax because I’ve got ye.” When he was halfway down he checked his companion and realized he was no longer conscious. Jamie quickened his pace and fought the tears hoping he wasn’t dead. “I know a great healer of dogs and wolves so dinna give up laddie. She will restore ye so dinna give up. I’ve seen her do it, bring a lad back from heaven’s door, so dinna give up.” Jamie kept talking to the wolf, repeating himself just to have something to say, and moving fast toward home. He pushed the door open and rushed to the table where he laid the animal down. No sign of life so he ran for Claire.

“Sassenach, love, ye must wake up now, it’s time for a miracle and I need ye to come and see.” Claire opened her eyes with alarm over the stress in Jamie’s voice.

“What is it, Jamie?” She saw his tears roll down his cheeks and jumped out of bed, following him to the kitchen.

“What in God’s name is that, Jamie?” While she listened to the story she inched closer and finally put her hands on the animal. “Oh Christ, he is near death from starvation… just like…pup was. She examined the sling and broken leg and turned to face her husband and is misguided hope. “Jamie, I’m so sorry, but he is too far gone to save I’m afraid.”

He looked at her for a long minute and she saw his disappointment. “Yer no tryin and I made a promise so I’ll do it myself since ye dinna care if he dies.”

Claire was stunned at Jamie’s words and vehemence. She watched Jamie try to pick the wolf up and stopped him. “I do care, and I do want to help him. Let me try, okay?” When she started moving again it was with purpose and life-saving speed. She called Ruby and barked orders for medical tools she needed, “and run Ruby.” Claire listened to the heart, checked for capillary response and then ran to the door when Ruby came in. In mere minutes there was a liter of fluids opened up into a vein and the catheter taped down to his good leg. Ruby assisted with clipping hair from the venipuncture site and holding the mouth open for a stomach tube. Shawn came in to check on the emergency that launched Ruby from the table at home.

“Oh God, that is a wolf ye got there. Where did he come from?”

Jamie, now more relaxed seeing Claire jump into action, told the story of finding the wolf high on the mountain. How he tied his leg and picked him up, carrying him home. “I dinna ken how he got there, no wolves around these mountains that I ken. I promised him the best of care if he dinna bite me. I need to keep my promise.”

Claire dialed her vet and was put through immediately. They discussed the situation and the vet apologized for not being able to help with a wild animal. “What an asshole.” She dialed Vickie and help arrived ten minutes later. Vickie crashed through the front door with wide eyes and excitement about giving aid to a wolf.

Jamie shook his head at this quirky veterinarian and felt a glimmer of hope. He bent to the wolf’s ear and spoke softly, “look, laddie, the A-team is here to save ye, just as I promised. Now it’s time to fight for yer life.” Vickie gulped air seeing the concern and love Jamie was pouring into the animal’s ear as he stroked his fur.
“Let’s get the leg set before the fluids make him feel good enough to fight us.” She pulled on a heavy lead coat and ordered everyone out of the room while she positioned the leg in her portable X-ray machine. She studied the X-rays for five minutes and then got Ruby to hold the leg in position while she prepared to cast it. Vickie called for blankets folded tightly to raise his lower body slightly, Claire kept a stereoscope on his heart and pressed salve into his parched eyeballs, Ruby kept a wet ball of towels on his tongue and changed the IV bag when it was near empty.

“There is capillary improvement and a stronger heartbeat Vickie.”

Vickie ran to her truck for a quick release paste and showed Ruby how to push it into the stomach tube. When it was empty, everyone waited for the next step. Vickie took a deep breath and sat down in the nearest chair. “Now we wait. Can I tell Henry to come over? I promised my job would not ruin another Saturday and here I am, somewhere other than home.”

Jamie noticed how Vickie blushed and softened in the presence of her husband. He saw the love between them and went out of his way to make Henry comfortable with a soft chair and a cold beer. He was so grateful for the efforts of his friends for this injured wolf. Beers were passed out to everyone, and then again while they waited. Henry was giggling from Vickie crawling into his lap, she was clearly drunk from one and a half beers. Claire and Ruby kept up their vigil reporting any changes to Vickie who was completely distracted by Henry.

Shawn inched closer to Ruby and suggested she back away a little and stand at the back end of the beast. Jamie realized Claire had her hands on the head or inside the mouth and pulled her hands away. “Just in case he wakes up Sassenach.” Vickie cleared her throat and gave her best impression of a veterinarian, “I give him about ten more minutes to show signs of life. It could be big but I think this is a hybrid, and domesticated. In other words, someone’s pet.”

Jamie snapped some pictures of the wolf with his phone and sent them to the lost pet website. “I’ll print some pictures and put them around the area tomorrow.” Claire heard something strange in Jamie’s voice but couldn’t figure it out. Another round of beers was served and the group sat and joked while they waited. Only Claire kept up her assessment and stayed on her feet. She ran her hand through the soft fur and talked to Sorcha who would not stop shaking. Claire had a strange feeling tugging on her heart and wanted to help Sorcha get used to the wolf while he slept.

A call to Sarah brought her running to see the wolf and she entered the kitchen wide-eyed and excited. “He needs yer wee prayers, Sarah. He needs to live,” Jamie said quietly. Sarah prayed silently and Jamie just stared at his fallen friend.

Claire watched Jamie go out of his way to make everyone comfortable. It was like he was saying thank you for helping the wolf. She didn’t understand it but watched her husband as the afternoon passed. There was a spike in the wolf’s blood pressure and heart rate and Claire reported the change to Vickie who did a quick assessment and asked everyone to back away from the table.

Jamie watched the wolf lay alone on the table, abandoned like no one cared for him. He pulled his chair to the table and stroked the beast speaking quietly in Gallic. “Ye matter to me laddie so I’ll thank ye to work a wee bit harder. Wake up and I’ll help ye find home.

There it was again, Claire thought. That strange pitch in Jamie’s voice. Whatever it was she knew he really cared about saving this animal so she would not rest or take a break until they knew he would survive. She ran her hand down it’s back and jumped back when it raised his head.

Jamie didn’t flinch and watched the wolf look around the kitchen, or try to. Jamie grabbed gauze and
pulled the salve out of his eyes and then smiled at him. “Well now, I’m impressed with yer effort, and I thank ye.” The wolf sniffed at his cast and looked at each face until he noticed Sorcha. Sarah was worried he wanted to eat the tiny dog and they all sat in utter amazement when his tail started wagging. The wolf was spellbound by Sorcha and she wiggled to get out of Claire’s arms.

“Let her go Sassenach. It’s okay, I am right here by his mouth. He won’t bite her. Please, mo chridhe.”

Claire set the wiggling Sorcha down near the wolf’s rear end and watched in horror as she pranced right up to his face, and licked him in the mouth. Jamie stopped her hands from reaching for her. He saw the wolf soften and put his head down for Sorcha to stand on her hind legs and put her paws on his face. The entire group was silent and watching Sorcha work her magic to calm the beast and make him happy. Claire could feel tears rolling down her cheeks as she realized the same antics and posturing Sorcha used on her patients. Sorcha curled up under the wolf’s neck and both fell asleep.

Sarah looked heavenward and smiled, “okay, that works too.”

The group disbanded for their homes and beds and Jamie hugged Claire to him thanking her for her tireless efforts on the wolf’s behalf. “Now what do we do with him?”

The second bag of fluids was discarded when empty and Jamie brought a bowl of cold water to the wolf and splashed the water coaxing him to drink. He raised his head and felt the water droplets land on his muzzle as Jamie dipped his fingers and let the water fall on him. Sorcha stood up and stretched into her yawn before prancing over to the bowl. She had to stand up on hind legs to lick at the water and looked over at the wolf like it was his turn. When the wolf lifted his head Jamie slid the bowl closer and the wolf dropped his parched tongue into the cold water. He laid his head down and went back to sleep, as did Sorcha pressed against his neck.

Claire could hardly believe what she was witnessing. Her little healer puppy was doing all she could to bring the wolf back to life. This was truly a miracle and the smile on Jamie’s face was another clue that this animal was very important to him.

“Well, what should we do with him? Put him in our room in case he goes into distress in the night?”

Jamie looked at Claire with such gratitude and bounded out of the kitchen to set up a waterproof bed for the wolf. Sorcha stayed close to the beast when Jamie moved him like she was showing him this is where he could rest. She stayed by him until Claire picked her up and got into bed. Jamie talked quietly to the animal and stroked his fur for a few minutes. “Looks like ye saved another one mo chridhe.”

Claire’s eyes slammed open deep in the night. She couldn’t feel Sorcha and her heart started pounding at the thought she could be hurt. She jumped out of bed and almost tripped over the wolf who had moved to her side of the bed. Sorcha was curled up against his neck and the two of them slept. “Jesus Christ, what if he wakes up hungry?”

“I have an idea Sassenach,” Jamie was groggy with sleep as he left the bedroom. He set a large bowl of food next to the wolf who slept soundly.

“What if Sorcha eats it?”

“It’s alright mo chridhe, it’s her food, every can we had actually.” He slid next to Claire who stayed close to the edge of the bed ready to grab Sorcha if she cried out. Hours later Claire heard the grrrr
woof of Sorcha and reached her hand down to pull her into bed. The tiny dog curled up into Claire’s stomach and was fast asleep.

Deep in her dreams, Claire felt something pulling her awake and she focused on the eyes of a wolf, inches from her face. She recoiled into Jamie with such force he grunted awake grabbing her in panic. Claire pushed back into Jamie holding onto to a wiggling Sorcha for dear life.

“Jamieeeee, it’s awake and wants to eat something.”

Jamie reached over her and stroked the wolf’s head while resting his chin on Claire's shoulder. Sorcha wiggled free and turned upside down wagging her short tail and pawing the wolf’s mouth. Try as she might, Claire could not convince Sorcha to go back under the covers. She could see the wolf’s tail wagging side to side and then noticed in horror that all the food in the bowl was gone.

“Dear Jesus, he will eat us all before the day is done.”

Jamie pulled her under the covers and investigated her curves making Claire forget the present danger as well as her own name. Sorcha took the leap to the floor and rejoiced in the reunion with her boyfriend, or maybe he was just a best friend.

The sun rose slowly flooding the foothills and valley below with light, promising a perfect Sunday. Claire woke up feeling dreamy if not a bit sore in the legs from her ride yesterday. She wandered out of the bedroom nuzzling Sorcha and looking forward to a cup of coffee.

“Jesus Christ, how could I forget about you?!" Sorcha was wiggling and trying to get out of Claire’s arms. Claire was pressed up against the wall scared stiff while the wolf looked at her and cocked his head. “You look far more menacing today but you’re getting around easy enough, time to find your home. Jamie!”

“Sassenach, get away from that wall and stand up straight. Dogs and…wolves sense fear and he will get confused. Ye must act like ye own the place. Because ye do. Let Sorcha go, please Claire, trust me.”

Claire looked like she might grab a heavy pan and hit him over the head with it. Jamie, not the wolf. She was tired and sore and fed up with a scary man-eating animal cuddling with her puppy and staring at her like a meal. She was so frustrated she wanted to cry.

“Let him outside and close the door, Jamie. Take him back up the mountain with provisions and leave him there.”

Jamie looked at his wife and wondered where his Sassenach had gone. She never had a mean bone in her body and always hell-bent to help those hurt or lost. He dropped his head and stared at the floor. In an instant, he felt the two months of fear and loneliness for her, and the grief seized his mind and heart so neither would work.

“Are ye still in there Sassenach?” He whispered. “If I wait long enough, and do everything for ye will ye come out again and be with me? Did I break ye leavin ye alone for so long?”

Claire was stunned. She put Sorcha down because she feared she might drop her. Jamie was crying with his head down. The man looked crestfallen and defeated like he was… done. She rushed to him and threw her arms around him.
“Jamie love. I’m sorry I was so mean about the wolf. Please, Jamie, forgive me.” She kissed his cheek and neck and held him tight. Something big was happening and she had no clue what it was but she was plenty scared by his reaction. “Please love. Come and talk to me.” She pulled him into the kitchen and sat at the table with him. “What is going on Jamie?”

He wouldn’t look at her and he didn’t answer. He just wiped his tears and withdrew like he was protecting himself from something. Claire was frantic with fear and felt Jamie’s heart jettison away from her, far away. Without another option, she squared her shoulders and spoke with authority.

“I call for the truth chair.”

Jamie’s head came halfway up but he didn’t look at her. He nodded. Claire was thoroughly freaked out and decided eleven o’clock in the morning was a great time for a whisky. She grabbed two glasses and the bottle and went to the lounge outside. She waited on her feet until he came out and laid down. She put a glass of whisky in the holder on his side and then laid next to him, throwing her’s back in one swallow. She laid on her side and looked at the man she had loved for twenty-five years. Her superman who risked his life to protect her and their infant son, offered her the world and his unconditional love. Now he laid next to her, arms crossed at this chest, eyes closed.

Claire’s heart was ramming in her chest but she felt a strength coming from a place deep inside, a rally of her energy to keep her man. Her incredible, wonderful, wounded man.

“What is Joe’s real name?”

Claire struggled with searching for the answer, feeling her heart break, and finally said she didn’t know. Hot tears were gushing from her eyes as she realized her absence in their lives. “Please, go on.”

“Memories of Pup and how ye loved him back to life. Ye were undaunted by the odds stacked against him and ye powered on like a love locomotive to save him. I already loved ye, but I lost my heart watching ye with Pup.” He was silent for a minute, “ye were different then.”

Another blow to Claire’s heart was threatening to undo her. She forced herself to calm down and not get defensive. “I don’t feel any different. Please, tell me more so I can understand.”

He brought her hand to his lips and she watched him struggle with his truth. “When did ye last call Ian?”

“Um…um, maybe last week? Oh my God, when I came home from the hospital I called him…and not since,” she whispered.

“Where is Faith this weekend?”

Claire
“Her, her name is Joe.”

Jaime shook his head. “Her name is Elizabeth Sierra Olsson. I remember how ye took Ruby under yer wing. Ye protected her and gave her the best ye had to give. Like ye were with everyone on the team, ye made it yer business to watch over them… but not anymore lass. Now ye sleep because ye gave up. On all of us.”

Claire’s sobs were choking her as Jamie’s truth was revealed. He gripped her hand but still hadn’t looked at her and she felt disconnected from him all that was good in the world.

“There’s more, isn’t there? I need to hear it all,” she sobbed out. “Jamie, please.”

“Ye gave up on me too, Sassenach. Yer leavin me, day after day while ye sleep. I made a mistake and neglected ye, us, for two years, so it’s my fault, but it’s tearin my guts out to watch ye fade away. I need ye to fight for your life, our life, but ye wilna.” Jamie’s tears fell onto his shoulder as he spoke and gripped her hand to his chest. “Don’t do this to me, Claire, I canna live without ye.” He broke down and pulled her into his arms, burying his head in her neck. Claire held him fiercely, “my sweet Jamie, forgive me, please love, I won’t give up, I want to stay with you. Please believe me.” They hugged each other like a life raft in a stormy sea and Claire told him she didn’t see it until now. She agreed to having no will to get stronger but now she realized she was needed, and loved, and missed. She begged him to believe her and promised him that she wanted to fight and be a wife, mother, and friend. She sobbed and clung to him. “I’m so sorry Jamie,” she sobbed, “please don’t give up on me.”

“I wilna.”

The perfectness of this Sunday was hidden from Claire until many months later when she remembered it was the day she took back her life, her children, her sport, and her true love, Jamie. The way she hugged him and cooked for him and tended to the wolf would fade in her memory, but not her steel resolve to fight her way back to the world she loved.

Claire filled the table with scrambled eggs, pancakes, sausage, and bacon and they gorged themselves on food and a promise in the air for better days ahead. Jamie was a bit timid but Claire teased him and hugged him back to his loving self. While Jamie finished everything on the table Claire went to dress and stood in the middle of the kitchen with her boots on and a leash in each hand. Jamie looked up at her and raised his eyebrows.

“Well, Vickie thinks he is a pet. Maybe he knows how to walk on a leash. I’m sure he needs to pee and poop with all he ate last night. She approached him laying on the floor and stroked his back. She put the leash on the floor in front of him and his tail came alive pounding the floor. Jamie’s eyes were wide as he swallowed his last bite. “Let’s go Sassenach.”

She had Pup’s collar in her hand also and kissed it before sliding it slowly onto the wolf. No push back. She clicked the leash to it and the wolf shot to his three feet limping to the door. “Wow, what a good boy!” Sorcha was having none of a free ride in Claire’s arms and continued to wiggle until she could walk with the wolf. It was the slowest walk in the history of mankind because the wolf had gallons of pee to distribute and pile after pile of poop. “Wow, do all wolves poop that much?”

“Nah, he held it, poor laddie, not wantin to give his position away when he was hidin up there.”

When they neared the end of their road the wolf started whining and making a strange noise with his
head down. He peered up at the mountain and tucked his tail.

“It’s alright laddie, let’s go the other way.” Claire stepped ahead and the wolf moved in that direction with nary a care.

“Jamie, he is struggling, maybe that’s far enough for today.” All were in agreement and they walked back to the house. Once inside Claire cleaned up the kitchen while Jamie read the interesting articles from the newspaper. She wanted and needed to be present for Jamie today but her need to speak with Ian finally drove her to the phone. She took several pictures of the wolf and sent them to Ian’s phone, then she called her son.

“How is the sweetest American in Scotland?”
“Yes, that is a wolf laying in our kitchen.”
“Yes, sweetheart, feeling much better. How are you?”

Jamie smiled at the love in her voice and knew the magic it would work on Ian. He had called weekly and desperately missed his mother. He penned a note he was going to the store for wolf food and steak. Claire hugged the phone to her ear wishing it was Ian in the flesh. When Jamie walked back in with bags of groceries Claire was saying goodbye.

Claire reached for Jamie’s neck and kissed his cheeks, neck, and mouth saying thank you. He could taste her salty tears and pulled her head back to look into her eyes. He saw something he recognized and could hardly control his need to touch her. He picked her up and laid next to her on their bed. Pulling her under him his kisses were hot and demanding while his hands were everywhere.

“I’m sorry lass, I canna go slow,” said into her mouth as he consumed her. Clothing came off and his body took possession of her driving the fear and pain away. Claire encouraged him with I love you’s, pulling him into her and biting his neck. When she flew into her orgasm Jamie was right behind her. Drifting back to earth, taking great gulps of air, she pressed her face to his neck and he held her close.

Jamie was aware of Claire fighting her heavy eyelids. She didn’t want to show her fatigue and his heart swelled with her desire to stay awake with him.

“Sassenach, I need to rest for a bit. After a late night and the emotional morning, I am done in. I want to feel ye next to me so stay with me, please.” He pushed the hair out of her face and smiled at her sleeping face. With a deep breath he settled in for a much needed nap. Just seconds from the blackness of sleep he heard the front door close and ten seconds later Faith screamed.

“Daaaaaa! Holy shit, stay back, Daaaaaa!”
Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

I have not been shy about writing the tough issues (I don't think) but this chapter needs a mild warning. Parts of this chapter expose the brutal reality of the Arizona desert. If you don't like reading about blood and guts you should skip it and wait for the next chapter. It will be very easy to catch up with the Frasers as they land in Scotland for the final chapter.

Jamie was dreaming of eating a sumptuous meal of all his favorite food while someone tickled his chin with a feather duster. His eyes slammed open and he smelled food cooking. His stomach rolled with hunger but when he tried to move he realized Sorcha had planted herself between his chin and shoulder and any movement pulled a tiny growl out of her. She did enjoy sleeping with a warm body and Jamie felt privileged she would choose him when Claire was busy in the kitchen. Jamie was so proud of the efforts Claire had made in the past three weeks. She looked happier, her skin was bright, and she had cut her daytime sleeping back about ninety percent. She was making a heroic effort and he never loved her more. When Sorcha growled again Jamie softly moved her over so he could get up.

The wolf looked up at him and wagged his tail making his wolf noises as he stretched and yawned. Jamie smiled at the sight of him. “If yer family doesna show up soon we have to give ye a name big guy.” He ran his hand down the animals back marveling at how beautiful he was with some weight and a shiny coat.

He walked into the kitchen in his sweat pants and wrapped himself around the busy Claire.

“What is the occasion that’s got ye up cookin so early this morning?”

“My boyfriend has an early meeting in the city this morning so I am cooking breakfast so he’ll be ready.”

She handed him a cup of coffee and put plates of food on the table before guiding him to it. She seemed extra happy today and Jamie was still trying to clear his mental cobwebs as he dug into breakfast.

Claire kissed Jamie goodbye and handed him his briefcase at the door. It was the exact opposite of their normal morning and Jamie felt happy with the unexpected send-off. It was a beautiful morning in the Arizona foothills and he was happy to be alive.

Once the kitchen was cleaned up Claire went to wake up Sorcha and the wolf. She was convinced they would sleep their lives away if she let them. A jolt went through her momentarily and she shook it off. Unknown to Jamie, she had cut her schedule back to three days a week again. It had taken three weeks to clear her schedule on Tuesdays and Thursdays but she wanted to surprise Jamie so nothing was said about it. Today, she pulled on her riding clothes and boots, ready to assert her position on the team and get the greenies ready for show. Three of the new horses had sold the past weekend one of the remaining three was Jamie’s favorite. She intended to find out just how special
Rupert’s face showed surprise when he saw Claire walking into the barn in her riding clothes. She smiled at him and pressed Sorcha into his chest causing an abrupt change in demeanor.

“I would like to ride the grey first Rupert. I will get him ready if you will keep Sorcha occupied.”

“Wait, lass, I canna hold her while ye ride. I have work to do. Joe is on the grey already. Inside arena.”

Claire seemed disappointed as she took Sorcha back and walked to the arena to watch. Angus was frustrated and Joe was red-faced and looking at the ground. They both perked up at Claire’s arrival but there was tension in the air and she leveled her gaze at the stunning gelding under Joe. She walked toward him never wavering in her stare. Sorcha, still not used to the size of these animals typically barked or growled when she got close to one. Sorcha was silent and Claire took that into consideration.

“Hello, handsome. It looks like you have the upper hand at the moment and it’s made you a bit cocky and conceited. I am here to ruin your day.”

Claire looked at Joe and asked if she might trade places for a few minutes. Joe’s feet hit the ground a few seconds later and she happily cuddled with Sorcha and walked to center ring.

Joe quietly asked Angus what was happening. She thought the smile on his face was strange in light of Claire taking over the grey. He was an obstinate and cantankerous mess in her opinion and she wondered how Jamie would ever cover his investment in this horse.

Claire noticed a slight shift in the horse's confidence, always a good sign she thought. The horse stepped away from her when she tried to mount. On the third attempt, she quietly walked the beast into the corner so he could not move away from her and she mounted sitting quietly while she adjusted her stirrups noticing the animal's ears rotated toward her. How nice to have your attention, she thought.

“Watch and learn lassie,” Angus whispered to Joe.

Claire slammed her feet into the stirrups while pulling the reins tight to the bit and she squeezed for a forward walk. Nothing. The grey was playing with the bit in his mouth and paying no attention to Claire’s leg. She raised her eyebrows at Angus and he shrugged. Could it be that Jamie picked a loser finally? Time to find out.

“Angus dear, can I borrow your spurs?” He wore them upside down to be kinder to the horse since they were designed to hurt when it was needed. Flipping them this way would still get the horse’s attention but would not draw blood. He noticed Claire put them on right side up. “I’m sorry to be a pest but I will need a crop as well.” Angus patted the horse's muzzle and shook his head. Joe just stared at Claire like she had a death wish.

She gave the leg to move to the rail and the grey moved like he was sleepwalking. Joe watched Claire pull her leather gloves out of a back pocket and pull them on while she attempted to collect the animal and push him into the bit. She gave a clear leg command to move forward and when the horse continued to saunter toward the rail Claire brought her sharp spurs to his sides and landed the crop soundly on his ass as she gripped the reins waiting for the fight. The horse lurched forward taking huge strides while rolling his eyes back toward the rider trying to figure out what just
happened. At the rail, he tucked his head and bowed his back as she asked and then moved through the foundation gates like the champ he was.

Angus held Sorcha’s leash and turned in a circle watching Claire prove Jamie right once again. Joe was impressed with the show of force and watched with anticipation.

The horse had the most beautiful canter when he was on the bit and Angus gave a low whistle of approval. When he got bored doing what he was told he stopped giving and ignored Claire’s leg for exactly two strides. Thwack! Another hard hit to his hind end and the horse decided he was done with this evil rider and took off with his head down. Claire could feel him, his anger, his ferocity, his inability to deal with this partnership. She kept his head up so he could manage only minor bucks and gave him a sharp stab of her spurs when he did raise his hind legs in rebellion. She let him run his anger out until he was frothing at the bit and slick with sweat.

Joe watched Claire’s movements in the saddle and decided she was zen to allow this temper tantrum from eighteen hundred pounds of pure pissed-off muscle. When he did not unseat her the horse reconsidered his next move and tried to slow down but his rider pushed him with her punishing spurs and slowly pulled him on to the bit again so his neck bowed and is back rounded.

Angus laughed with excitement, “ye fucked with the wrong lass ye big idiot!”

Claire spoke to the grey quietly and rubbed his neck when he acted like a gentleman. She pulled the dressage gates from him and Joe was gasping at how he moved. Claire didn’t let up but pointed him to a jump expecting the worst. Angus called out to watch the right side but she felt it already and brought her crop forward so he could see it just before he jumped. Three more times over the same jump and she rubbed his neck and let him pull the reins forward as he walked.

Claire was smiling and heaping love on the horse as he walked and cooled off. He was magnificent in her eyes, equal only to one very special horse she had known. Donus. She came eye to eye with Jamie when she passed the door into the arena and wondered how long he had been there. He watched with wonder and signaled her center arena. Claire noticed Jamie size up the beast as she jumped off. He ran his hand down its neck and back looking him over.

“Looks like ye have a place to stay for awhile laddie.” He handed the reins to Rupert and took his wife and Sorcha home.

Claire watched Jamie covertly and saw his unmistakable interest in the grey. He would be hard to sell because he was headstrong, unwilling, and too powerful for any but the best riders. She saw a match made in heaven and hoped Jamie did too.

“Why are ye not wearin a tight skirt and high heels Sassenach?”

“I've dropped back to three days a week so I can ride for you and get these greenies sold. I wanted to surprise you.”

Jamie stared at this remarkable rider and smiled, “I dinna think I can afford ye.” He pulled her into his arms and laughed. “That was quite a ride Sassenach. How does it feel?”

“Like a long lost friend actually.”

They both turned their head to the strange language of the wolf. Like a moaning bark that sounded like he was talking. It was time for a pee and he limped to the door to wait for Jamie.
“I have put up at least thirty signs with his picture and no a word from the owners. What should we do with him, Claire?”

Her eyebrows shot up and she looked at her husband, “Keep feeding him.”

“C’mon Rollo, let’s get ye outside. I just named him Rollo. Do ye think it suits him?”

“Was Rollo a part of the history of the West?”

“Nah, it’s my favorite candy and I’m cravin for it.”

“Yes, it suits him perfectly.”

After Jamie took the wolf outside Claire looked around for Sorcha growing more frantic every second she wasn’t found. “Sorcha baby! Come here for a treat!” Claire sped through the house looking under beds and behind doors. “Christ, Sorcha where are you?” She peeked in the laundry room and found her sweet puppy laying on a pile of dirty clothes. Claire stopped in her tracks and picked her up speaking softly to her.

“Did you get scared today sweet one?” Claire laid on the couch so she could look into Sorcha’s eyes. She kept talking in a low voice and eventually the puppy started acting more lively and normal. “I’ve done a fine job of creating an impossible situation. You won’t leave my side and the horses scare you to death. Let’s Google it, shall we?” Claire opened her laptop and searched for desensitize dogs. “Here we go Sorcha, twelve steps to counter-condition your dog. Wow, that is a lot of steps.” Claire tried to read through her yawns and leaned against the wall where she promptly fell asleep.

Jamie looked at his sleeping wife and wondered how she did not fall into the laptop. After fighting that beast of a horse today she had a bonafide reason to be tired and a short nap would restore her energy.

“Ye wilna allow it love, and that will make ye sick again.”

Claire sat up straight, “what won’t I allow?”

Jamie kissed the top of Claire’s head. “Lay down and get comfortable, set an alarm for thirty minutes. Ye ken how often I do just that and I want ye to try it, mo chridhe. It’s a healthy way to re-energize. I have to get back to the barn so promise me.”

Jamie thought about the grey gelding on his way back to work. When his fingers started to itch he knew it wouldn’t stop until he felt the horse under him and tested the magic. He smiled to himself with growing excitement for dawn tomorrow.

Later, in early evening, Claire found Joe and waved her closer. She made Joe a promise and was late in fulfilling it.

“Hi, Joe. I wanted to know if you are still considering the surgery we talked about.”

“I thought you forgot.”

“I am so sorry. I have had a hard time getting my feet under me after the heart attack. I’m better now and if you still want this I think we should speak to your parents.”
“Ok.” Joe walked into the barn and Claire wondered if she was coming back. One of the borders engaged Claire for a few minutes and when she turned toward the barn she almost ran into Joe.

“I thought you wanted to talk to my parents.”

Claire took Joe’s cell phone and spoke to her mother who said they would drive to the barn at Claire’s convenience to discuss the surgery. They agreed on the following Tuesday.

Claire looked at Joe and knew how much she wanted this. “If we get lucky and sell the last three horses this weekend I can do the surgery next week and have the following week to monitor your recovery. That is what I hope for, otherwise, you will need to be examined by my partner after I leave for Scotland. I’m sure you are anxious to get out of that trailer and go home for a few months. Let’s hope for the best. I don’t know if you would consider it but I am willing to help with any of the greenies.

“Why are you asking me that question?”

“Well, you are head rider so I will help when you want me to. Joe, I’m a doctor, my priority is with my practice. I will be here two days a week until we leave and I would be happy to help.” Joe walked toward her trailer without another word.

Claire pulled Sorcha out of her pocket and watched her yawn and wag her tail. “You can walk young lady.” After a decent shake and a squat Sorcha pranced happily into the barn on Claire’s heels until she spotted the grey gelding at which time she ran through the bars of his stall and bit him soundly above the hoof. She had a good hold of him so she shook her head from side to side and growled like a rabid beast.

“Jesus! Sorcha, no!” Claire pulled Sorcha away from the horse and walked her to Jamie’s office where she pulled horse hair out of her mouth while telling Jamie he should check the horse. She lifted Sorcha so she was eye to eye and told her she was a very bad dog. Sorcha growled defiantly.

Jamie’s boots crushed loudly over the dirt road leading to the barn. It was still dark but the sun would be rising soon. He loved this time of day and always thought of Donus stomping his feet impatiently, waiting for the rider. It had been years since he last raced his big horse to the gate and he missed those mornings terribly. He entered the grey’s stall with his brush bucket and spoke to the giant about racing across the field and leaping over obstacles. “Trust me not to hurt ye and give me everything ye’ve got. That is all I can ask. Ready?”

Jamie didn’t bother going into the outside arena. He warmed the horse up on the outside of the rail and spoke to him encouragingly giving lots of neck pats to show his approval and sharp discipline when he didn’t. When the horse failed Jamie started the gaits again from the beginning. When they had worked through all of the grey’s fears and misbehavior’s, Jamie walked him onto the field and let the horse investigate some of the jumps.

“I’m impatient for ye to dazzle me laddie so here we go.” Jamie circled at a canter until he felt the gelding on the bit. The first three jumps were rushed and he was deep when he left the ground. Jamie was sure he would find his spot on the next jump but instead, he quit almost launching Jamie over his head.

Claire gasped slapping a hand to her mouth and looked at Joe who was the picture of calm. They were hiding behind some trees as they agreed to the day before and had a great view of the field.
They saw Jamie start the jumps over again. For the next thirty minutes, they watched the master at work and Sorcha growled in Claire’s pocket.

“How did you know Jamie would ride him this morning?”

Claire smiled at Joe, “I know him better than I know myself.”

Jaime was smiling and jumped off the horse to walk him cool. He pulled his saddle off to speed the process and stopped to let the horse drink when they came to the water feature. The horse slowly walked into the water making big splashes with his hooves... and then he laid down.

“Holy shit! Did you see that Joe? Jamie will have his hands full now so I am going back to the house before he sees me. I have to get to work. Catch you later.”

Jamie crossed his arms and looked at the ridiculous gelding laying in water that was ten inches deep. He wasn’t about to ruin his Ariat field boots walking in after the crazy animal so he sat against his saddle and closed his eyes. Sometime later the spray of cold water was such a shock to the snoring Jamie he was on his feet in seconds, scowling at the grey. “Well, laddie, ready for breakfast?”

That evening, Claire confessed to her spying with Joe and teased Jamie about his water-loving horse. Jamie chuckled admitting he knew of no other horse to lay down in ten inches of water.

“He looked amazing Jamie, and…well…so did you but that’s a given.”

Jamie’s eyes narrowed at his wife and he wrapped her up so she couldn’t move. “Nae lass, suppose ye tell me about how amazin I looked.”

Claire giggled as she squirmed out of his arms heading for the bedroom and a shower. She turned to look at him, “you looked like you were having the time of your life sweetheart.”

Prime horse flesh, a talented rider, and a bit of luck that brought the right two buyers to the show, made an easy ride home with an empty trailer. Jamie was happy with the money they made, happy his greenie obligation was over, and happy with his new partner who flew over the eventing field each morning at dawn. One thing held him back from really bonding with the grey and he waited for a sign the horse wanted to be out there. With Donus, there was never a question about how he loved it. Jamie hoped the grey would find the same interest.

Jamie pressed the cruise control and sat back into his seat while Claire typed at lightning speed returning email messages. He thought about Rollo and felt his stomach grip him. No one responded to his lost wolf posters so he had no family except Jamie and Claire and they were leaving in two weeks for Scotland. What would they do with a pet that no one would keep? It was tearing him up inside and he prayed for a miracle, and soon.

Claire snapped her laptop closed making Jamie jump. He looked around wondering how far they were and decided to stop daydreaming during these long rides. “Talk to me lass, I need a distraction.”

“Okay, I am going to teach you all the bones in your foot until you have them memorized. There are only twenty-six, it will be fun. Ready?”

Jamie groaned and looked like he would rather swallow sharp nails. “Or, you can talk about what is bothering you this weekend and maybe I can help.” His next look was full of appreciation.
“I’m worried about Rollo. He canna fly with us to Scotland and he has no family but us and no one will keep him for three months because he’s a wolf.”

Claire looked stricken. “I made arrangements for Sorcha to fly with us as a companion dog and didn’t even think about Rollo. Damnit!” Jamie jumped again at Claire’s outburst, it was very uncharacteristic. “That animal has never been anything but sweet to me, and Sorcha, so why do I have this mental block against him?”

“Because he’s a wolf Sassenach.”

“My behavior towards Rollo is dreadful but I’m not aware of it until the damage is done. I hate this part of my character Jamie. Hopefully, I will get better with him.”

Jamie knew Claire to be the most open-hearted person on the planet, but Rollo remained an unwelcome threat in her home. How could he ever expect a better reaction from others? He could hear the clock ticking in his head. Two weeks until Rollo was homeless.

Claire stumbled to the kitchen Tuesday morning in search of coffee. When Jamie had an early ride there was always coffee made when she woke up. Sorcha was still pressed under Rollo’s chin sound asleep so Claire pulled out her pre-departure list and checked off what was done already.

“Mom, can you ship my winter clothes to Scotland now, with your stuff? That way it’s already there when I come in July.”

“Of course sweetheart. Grab a box from the patio and fill it up. I’ll make sure it goes with the others. Keep the door closed so Sorcha doesn’t get out.”

Faith came bounding in ten minutes later trying to negotiate the Arcadia door with her empty box. Claire was so happy she figured it out and went back to her coffee.

Later when she breezed by her room on the way to the shower she roused the sleeping dogs so they could eat before she left for the barn. Rollo’s head popped up and he ran for his breakfast in the kitchen. “C’mon Sorcha, rise and shine.” Claire had a strange foreboding feeling in her stomach. Surely Sorcha ran out of the bedroom before Rollo and she didn’t see her. Her heart pounded so hard she could feel it in her temples. Something was wrong, where was Sorcha?

Claire ran through the house checking doors, under beds, closets, couch, and raced into the kitchen seeing the unthinkable. The arcadia door was open several inches from the curtain getting caught in the runner. She was shrieking for Sorcha as she pushed the glass door open and screamed at the top of her lungs. "Sorcha!" She pushed the door open and ran outside.

Sorcha had her little nose to the grass completely oblivious to the coyote that stalked her smelling the air with a second coyote to the right also closing in. “Sorcha, come!” Claire ran until her legs burned and she watched the coyotes close in on her dog. She realized with horror that she wouldn't make it, Sorcha had to run to her or die. Claire screamed for Sorcha to come as she ran as fast as she could. “NO no no!” Like slow-motion, Sorcha lifted her head to see Claire just before turning the other direction to see the eyes of her killer a foot away. Claire screamed NO and watched the coyote close in for the kill. The coyote reached his open mouth for the tiny dog just before it shot sideways a good five feet. Claire saw a brown streak run into the coyotes and she reached for Sorcha pulling her into her chest. One coyote flew in the air spewing blood as he somersaulted to the ground, the other was pinned down by the snarling Rollo showing his inch long sharp teeth before he ripped it’s throat out.
Rollo looked up into the hills looking for more as Claire reached the house.

“Rollo! Come now! Come this instant!”

The wolf jogged to Claire looking behind him several times. Claire pulled him in the house and slammed the Arcadia door closed, locking it tightly with shaking fingers.

“Jaime! She was screaming into the phone and pulling the animals to her. She sat on the floor holding them both while she yelled into the phone.

Jamie came through the front door like a tornado and saw Claire holding the animals. She was stammering, “in the back.” Jamie looked out at the carnage as the pack of coyotes gorged themselves on the corpses.

“Stay right there Claire, dinna move.”

Claire held onto Rollo and Sorcha, sobbing with the shock, and did not move. A short time later she heard pop, pop, pop, a minute later, pop, pop, pop, pop. She was wide and wild eyed when Jamie sunk to his knees and held her.

“It’s over Sassenach. Breathe lass and stop yer cryin. I killed them all, I think. Six total are dead. Sassenach, I must ask ye to pull yerself together and tell me what happened.”

It took several minutes but Jamie was getting the picture, a very horrifying picture. It shook him to the core when he imagined Claire running into the jaws of the coyotes to rescue Sorcha.

He grabbed Rollo to him, “Thank Christ ye were there Rollo.”

He lifted Claire from the floor and walked to the couch. She instantly jumped off to sit on the floor and held her hand out to Rollo who was timid, unsure if he had done a bad thing.

“Rollo, sweetheart, come here.” He approached Claire with his head down and she pulled him to her kissing his face before looking for wounds. One hand searched for tooth punctures the other held onto Sorcha who was shaking and deathly quiet. Jamie joined them on the floor with two whisky’s and Rollo collapsed in his lap panting.

“Yer a hero Rollo, and I will find a way to get ye to Scotland, dinna worry.”
Chapter 62

I sat in the shade of the picnic table and watched Jamie, Rollo, and the two Ians, play catch football. Rollo was the clear star of this game but fun was had by all. Our Ian is the spitting image of his father but with my dark curly hair. It takes my breath away to see them together, both so handsome and self-assured. Ian is building bridges for the City of Edinburgh which is exactly the job he has wanted throughout his studies in structural engineering. I am so happy he is living the life he dreamed of. Ian will supervise the building of our house so there have been many nights father and son have bent over blueprints until the wee hours. Jamie is so proud of him.

Ian was quite a good rider when he moved to Scotland full time. He loved riding with Shawn’s group and sometimes rode alternate in team roping but his first love was jumping. He was a natural and we always thought he would continue riding in Scotland but school work didn’t allow outside pursuits, at least that is what he always told me. I stopped asking and assumed he didn’t love it as we did. When he asked us to attend his horse show over our first weekend here I almost fainted.

“Da, I want you and mom to come to my horse show this weekend. Will ye come?”

Jamie and I listened with rapt attention when he told us he started exercising horses for a start-up barn outside Edinburgh and eventually became the owner’s rider. He never said anything about it because he didn’t want to let Jamie down if he quit again. His barn was hosting horse trials and eventing the following weekend and we were thrilled to go and watch him. Before the stadium jumping it was announced that Jamie Fraser, world champion, was in the stands and all eyes turned to Jamie when he waved. I cried like I had every day with Ian, watching him race across the field, meeting his girlfriend, and watching the introduction to Rollo to name a few.

Rollo was transported to Scotland by AirPet and his journey took two days longer than ours. Jamie was so excited to pick him up he hardly slept the night before. Ian was expected at Lallybroch so I stayed behind and big Ian opted to go fetch the wolf with Jamie. I told my son the history of the wolf, how he was found, how Jamie refused to let him die, and how he saved us from killer coyotes. When the men drove up I could see a large shipping crate with one beautiful wolf inside. Ian watched with wide eyes as he was released and dropped to his knees and waited. It took ten minutes or so but Rollo became curious about the man that stared at him from his level and came closer to have a look and a sniff. Rollo sat down in front of Ian and the two looked at each other like long lost friends. I cried, remembering the special bond he had with Pup, his constant companion. Ian ran his hand down his back and spoke quietly to the wolf. I couldn’t hear but it was calming to Rollo. I realized that they were both young adults, full of power and energy, like kindred spirits. After that, Ian and Rollo would disappear into the woods for hours while the rest of the world went on without them. This would live in my memory as the summer of Ian and Rollo.

When Faith joined us in July, Ian took his two-week vacation and we scoured the Highlands, the islands, the castles and even Culloden Moor where the Jacobites faced the great British army and were slaughtered in the seventeen hundreds. Jamie told us it was the end of the clans and their way of life. When the Fraser rock was found he told us about his great, great, uncle, also named James Fraser, later known as the Dun Bonnet, and how he led his troops into battle in the uprising. Ian corrected him twice because he had read the old bibles so often the story was burned into his memory. I cried.

Some evenings I would look for the children and see them walking in the fields or sitting away from us talking. Faith spent almost half her life without her brother but she worshiped him and hung on his
every word. Ian indulged her and even took her shopping in the city one day. Rollo sat on the dirt road in front of Lallybroch and waited for Ian to return. It was clear to me that Rollo had bonded with Ian and worried about how Jamie would accept the idea of him staying in Scotland.

Ruby yawned and dropped her paintbrush into the solvent as she stretched her back. She was troubled. The painting of Jamie was easy because there was so much material about his life leading up to the minute the picture was snapped for the magazine cover. She knew his meteoric rise in the equestrian world, his challenges and failures, and his determination to rule his sport. She painted emotion and felt she had nailed Jamie. She looked at her graphite renderings of Claire that filled her board and felt lost. She had no idea what her expression meant and to guess could jeopardize the painting. She had been painting all night and no progress had been made. She went out to find Sarah reading the paper in the back yard. Ruby pulled her clothes off, always happy she wore her suit underneath and jumped into the pool. Sinking to the depths she wondered what Claire was smiling about at that moment in time.

“You should not paint all night Ruby, it’s going to make you sick. What’s wrong dear?”

“My painting of Claire is not working. I don't know what she is smiling about. I can’t paint her. Sorry.”

“Wait, what is wrong with it? We have to fix this Ruby. Maybe she is smiling because it’s so much fun. Or maybe she knew there was a photographer there?”

“I pulled up hundreds of pictures of eventing and not one of the riders was smiling. Not one. If you were galloping toward a jump four feet high and five feet wide there isn’t brain space to notice a photographer. Not when your life hangs in the balance. So why did she smile?”

Sarah was the repository of Claire’s life story beginning at birth. The women shared hundreds of hours over the years telling each other every detail of their struggles, achievements, fears, and dreams. Sarah was taking a chance but she started to tell Ruby what she knew about Claire’s life and it was not an easy story to hear. Ruby cried hearing about her parent's death and the years following her uncle into remote areas of the world. Growing up without friends, living in a tent, getting her first period with no one to help her. How she cried alone in her tent for years because she was all alone and Lamb was distant.

“When she was eleven, an equestrian joined them with his horses. I believe they were in Croatia at the time, or maybe it was somewhere else, I can’t remember. It was the first time in six years she felt any excitement because she loved the horses. Fine animals, not like the pack mules they used. She hung around them all the time and learned how to brush them and braid tails. She watched the man exercise the horses for hours. He put her in the saddle at one point and walked her around the camp so she could feel the animal under her. It was a turning point for her and slowly the man gave her more independence and taught her how to ride basically. She was happy, bless her heart, and the man must have seen this because she always had access to the horses. She told me she would snap her fingers along with the horse's gait to better understand the timing. She saw the man jump over something and said she almost fainted with excitement.”

Sarah watched Ruby struggle to understand such a lonely life, and what the horses must have meant to her. How she survived without loving parents to guide her and protect her.

“Keep in mind that she rode barefoot because the sandals they wore would not fit in the stirrups. Anyway, the man had teamed up with her uncle and they stayed together through her remaining years in the field. The man taught her trick riding and covert leg cues like those used in dressage and
she practiced day after day for five more years.”

Ruby was on the edge of her seat and asked how that Claire could ever become the Claire she knew.

“Lamb brought her back and enrolled her in public school when she was sixteen I think. Having only the education provided by Lamb she still managed to test into her junior year because she’s a brainiac. Lamb enrolled her in some fancy equestrian program in the summers and kept her riding throughout the school year as well. She was riding for owners at eighteen when she started her pre-med training in Boston.”

Ruby cried again when Sarah gave her the details of her relationship with Frank along with the emotional abuse, neglect, and ultimately the loss of her beloved horses. She explained her courageous escape from Boston with Fred and Ginger and Jamie pulling her out of Fred’s stall when he found her sleeping the first night.

“Jamie Fraser fell in love with the beautiful but quirky Claire and they were inseparable in a very short time. I met them early in their relationship and remember thinking I could put each of them on opposite sides of the planet and they would find each other again. It’s a rare bond they have.”

Ruby squirmed. “I still don’t understand her expression in the picture. It is telling a story and I still don’t know it.”

“Jamie’s thing is eventing and Claire wanted to do it. Maybe because Jamie loved it or maybe it was her next big hurdle on a horse, no pun intended. Jag was purchased as a greenie because Jamie knew he would be a great eventing horse. Claire was his rider for jumping and dressage and he asked if she wanted to try it. She worked very hard at running the field at a breakneck speed but wasn’t very good at it, if you can believe that. In the process, she fell in love with Jag. When she hit a wall with her training Jamie told her to go fast or lose Jag.”

“What? Wait. I can’t see Jamie being so mean. Why would he do such a thing?”

“I don’t know Ruby. But I know he loved Claire more than anything in the world so I’m sure he had his reasons. It came down to one last ride on the field where Claire would prove her metal or walk away from Jag and eventing. She told me she just surrendered and rode with all the passion and faith she had. All I ever heard from Jamie is they went in as individuals and came out as partners. After that, she was devoted to eventing and she and Jag were unstoppable.”

“That’s it.” Ruby took a deep breath and smiled. “That is what I see on her face.”

“What do you see on her face Ruby?”

“Everything you just said.”

Ruby returned to her room and ripped all the renderings of Claire off of her board. She used a large sheet of paper and drew in Claire’s face, helmet, and shoulders. It was all about the expression of pure joy and partnership. Her body is held just inches above Jag’s back like she is a part of him but he can still move freely over the huge jumps. Her joy comes from her love and trust in Jag. They are both doing what they love with complete faith in the other.

“Oh my God.” Ruby looked at her hasty drawing and knew she finally had it. She was elated and let out a whoop before she tore out the front door, late for her chores.
Jamie held his hand out to me after dinner and we walked through the fields around the estate. There was so much going on at Lallybroch with house plans, horse shows, a pack of young children and a brand new grandson, that I hardly spent any time with Jamie. I was happy for a bit of quiet time with him.

“I think it’s time to say goodbye to Rollo lass.”

“Does it hurt you to let him go?”

“Nah, he was never meant for our lives. I was just a pathway to Ian.” I looked at Jamie and he kissed my forehead. “Although, it might be a way to get Ian to visit more often.”

I laughed at that knowing Jamie could never withhold something from his son. “You have been his rock since you brought him into this world on the side of the road. He has followed in your footsteps Jamie, choosing to live in a country away from his family, chasing his dreams. I couldn’t be more proud of him, or you.”

I kept up with Sarah every day by text but today I got the crazy idea to do a video chat and show her around Lallybroch. She was thrilled. I started in the house with a quick tour, pointing out the parts of the structure still standing and in service since it was built almost three hundred years ago. Jamie waved and smiled from his blueprints at the kitchen table. I showed her around the grounds hearing her gasp at the beauty. It was when I entered the woods to show her the stakes that delineated the corners of our house, and others for the barn, that she fell silent. I turned the phone around to see if she was still there and realized she was just speechless.

“Thank you, Claire. Now I will know what you’re talking about when you get home. I am so happy you let me see this beautiful place.”

“Sarah, I feel something magical out here, something benevolent but powerful. It is always here in the woods and I want to be close to it.”

“Her eyes sparkled when she spoke to me. “Talk to it. It doesn’t matter that you don’t know what it is. It’s there for you. It’s waiting to hear from you, Claire. Talk to the power you feel in the woods. Over and out.”

I accidentally dropped the phone into the wrong pocket and heard Sorcha yip in pain. I pulled her out and made a fuss over hurting her. She yawned and wagged her tail trying to lick my face. We walked through the woods a bit and she was darting her eyes from the trees to the logs, stones, and nearby stream. She continued to yawn so I put her back in my trench coat pocket and sat alone on a rock. I whispered all the things I was grateful for and realized the list was quite long. I told Pup and Jag how much I loved them and didn’t feel at all silly. Somehow, I felt they would hear me.

Our last day at Lallybroch is bittersweet. We are ready to go home and resume our place at the center and my practice, but leaving Ian, Jenny and big Ian is so hard. Ian asked me to walk with him and Rollo and I happily agreed. He was quiet at first but when he started talking I knew he had something important to say. I stayed quiet and gave him time to say it.

“I don’t know if you realize how lonely I am for you, how lonely I’ve always been for you. From the first time I hugged ye goodbye at the airport until now, that has never changed. It never goes away. I have wanted to tell ye a thousand times and always figured I would do it next time we talked.”

He paused and I put my arm through his.
“When ye got sick I feared I wouldn’t have a chance to tell ye so I’m doin it now. Ye’re my greatest love Mom, and ye always will be. A love so pure and unconditional it goes on forever and never diminishes. I’m a grown man but I cry when I talk about ye to my friends and my girlfriend. I miss ye every single day and I want ye to know that.”

He stopped and smiled at my tears like he understood the overwhelming love because he felt it too. “This is for you mom, so every time you see it or touch it ye’ll know I’m thinking of ye.”

I opened the small box and felt my heart in my throat. A lovely necklace with a heart and two gems attached to it. It was beautiful and I knew they were birthstones of Ian and Faith. He put it on for me and I hugged him for a full minute wishing I could hold onto him forever.

“Grrrr.”

“Did ye hear that mom?” Ian looked around for Rollo and shook his head. “I could swear I heard something growl.”

“That would be Sorcha.” I pulled her out of my pocket and Rollo was quick to stick his nose up to her and make his wolf noises. She wiggled until I put her down on the forest floor and she immediately ran to Rollo.”

“They’re friends and Rollo might miss her.”

“She will be back in seven months and they will have the whole summer together. Just like us.”

When we returned to Lallybroch, Jenny and her daughters were bringing food to the outside table. Several kinds of meat were cooking over the fire, bowls of salads, vegetables, bread, and side dishes covered the table. Jamie looked up at us and saw the new necklace around my neck. He smiled and turned back to his conversation with Faith.

The meal and conversation lasted until well after dark. It was like no one wanted it to end. Jamie, Faith and I would leave before sunrise to catch our flight back to Arizona. As the fire threw shadows across his handsome face I hugged Ian hard enough to last the next seven months, and I cried watching his car disappear down the road. Jenny gave me a squeeze and a compassionate look. “It willna be long before yer with him again sister.” She couldn’t be more right and I felt a balance snap into my soul and the sadness lessen.

When we were in bed, Jamie held me close in the dark. “I’m a grateful man tonight Sassenach,” he whispered.

Standing at the arrival curb at Sky Harbor airport I feel disoriented and sleepy. Jamie keeps checking on me and I smile at him but I am struggling. I need to lay down in my own bed and process these emotions. I look through the line of cars for Sarah and finally see her, raising my hand to get her attention. Jamie holds my hand and keeps the conversation going with Sarah. I see her glancing at me in the rearview mirror and there is concern in her eyes. I squeeze Jamie’s hand and smile, forcing myself to add to the conversation and show them I’m not sick, just a little heartbroken. I wonder if it will ever get easier to leave Ian behind.

Driving up Ironwood I feel a bit better, more excited to see our house and the barn. Sarah asked if we had the energy to walk through the barn and even Faith said yes. There were some boarders there
but when they saw us come in they kind of vanished. Jamie gave love to the grey and promised a ride on the field tomorrow. I got a hug from Sarah’s therapy horses, Micky and Minnie. When we turned the corner toward the office I saw a group of people, like they were waiting for us. Ruby, Shawn, Rupert, Angus, Vickie and her husband, Dougal, and our favorite borders. I looked at Jamie and he looked as confused as I felt. Ruby flew into my arms and there were cheek kisses from the guys. I was saying hello and feeling very welcomed when I heard Jamie gasp.

“Christ Ruby…what…Claire!”

I turned completely around and then I saw them. Two large paintings hung on the wall leading to the office. Above them, it said, A Tribute To The Champions.

I heard myself say “oh my God” over and over and then “Ruby!” I gripped her still looking from one to the other. When I looked at Jamie’s picture I heard the roar of the crowd, when I looked at mine I heard my pounding heart, hooves galloping, and I smelled Jag. How remarkable.

“Sarah commissioned the paintings.”

“Sarah!”

I held them both and stared at the paintings, completely overcome. Jamie was speechless and when he tried to thank Ruby he spoke Gaelic and then shook his head. He eventually thanked them both in English.

Sorcha was not happy being smashed between bodies and started barking in my pocket. When I set her on the ground she took off, much to my horror. I went after her and watched her look into stalls until she found the grey. Then she dashed inside and bit him above his hoof, shaking her head savagely. I screamed for Jamie and grabbed Sorcha away. The grey was unaware of a little dog trying to kill him.

“Sorcha you are a bad dog, no!”

Sorcha looked at Jamie with a mouth full of horsehair and growled but his attention had been stolen away by the beautiful gelding. I watched him run his hand down his neck and back, transported into a world of flying across the field with his friend. I wondered if my eyeballs were going to wash out of my head with all the tears I had shed.

Sarah watched Jamie, “that’s quite a horse you have there. Is he your new Donus?”

Jamie gave a half-smile, “unfortunately no. He is in service only, he doesna love it like Donus did. I’ll sell him with the next round if we can teach him to quiet down.”

I felt my heart drop and tried to keep it from my face. I really thought he had found a new partner to fill the loneliness for his magical Donus.

Later, Jamie pulled me toward the door and we walked home. It was good to be back in our house and I pulled up the wolf’s bed and bowls and put them away. I realized I had left Pup’s collar on the wolf and felt panic at first, but realized a piece of Pup was now with Ian and so was the wolf. Nothing in this world could be bad about that.

“Jamie, why won’t the grey work for you? I thought you liked him.”
“I do mo chridhe, but his heart isna on the field or flyin over a jump like Donus. He does it because he has to and happy when it’s over I’m sure. It’s okay love, old men shouldna ride big brutes anyway.”

Jamie slipped from bed at five in the morning and made his way to the barn, feet crunching on the dirt and pebbled road. He was excited to ride after three long months. He looked out over the field and saw the goofy chickens emerging from their coop. The air was chilly, promising the arrival of fall, and all that goes with it. Jamie’s boots crunched louder on the stones of the driveway and though his mind was a million miles away…he heard it. He stopped to listen, and there it was, the hoof of a monster horse banging on the corral bars saying hurry up, I’ve missed this, I’m ready to go.

The End

End Notes

It is with a heavy heart that I complete this story because I love it so much. I have mad appreciation and gratitude for the readers who’s comments and enthusiasm kept me writing. Thank you for letting me drop our favorite characters into my world. It was really fun. I love you guys!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!