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## Summary

Claire and Jamie are forced into marriage to ease the tensions between two clans.

## Notes

Sorry it took me so long to update, but I hope this fic will make it up to you!
This is the first chapter of the first part of this fic: Scotland
“Here we are.”

The shadow of castle Leoch appeared just in front of us, standing tall on the hill. After more than four days on horseback, going from the lands of the clan Grant to the castle of clan MacKenzie, finally seeing our destination only made the pit in my stomach deeper and I was afraid it would swallow me alive.

When we arrived, I was immediately brought to my room, where a hot bath was waiting for me and a nice-looking clean gown was lying on my bed.

I let out a sigh as I sat in the bath, the warm water making the hairs on my arms stand up and a shiver run down my spine. It felt good, especially after sleeping in the mud under the stars.

After taking more time washing than I probably should have, I got out and put on my shift. Glenna and Mary, two of my friends and maids from clan Grant, helped me dress and did my hair. I had to be pretty to meet my new clan Chief, but mostly, I had to make the best impression on my future husband, at least, that’s what the Laird wanted.

“You look beautiful, Claire.” Mary told me. She was a young maid I had met when I first arrived at the clan Grant. She had only been there for a few weeks, as I had been told, but nobody - save the chief - knew where this young stuttering english girl came from. Two sassenachs in a castle filled with scots, it hadn’t take long for our bond to deepen and since then we were inseparable.

“Aye, if James Fraser doesna find a pretty lass like ye a good prospect for a wife, then he is a fool.” Glenna said, looking at me in the mirror with the kindest smile on her round face.

We had left the castle for our journey less than a week ago, and it was around that time that I had been told that the chief of the Grants was giving me away in marriage to the nephew of the laird of clan MacKenzie to ease the tensions between the two scottish clans.

When my father was very sick, he wrote a letter to my uncle Lamb who had married a scottish lass and had moved to live with her at the castle of clan Grant. The letter said that when my father was going to die, I’d go live with them and he would take care of me like his own daughter. Everyone at the castle loved him. He was a brilliant healer, in fact, he was the one who taught me everything about surgery and my mother had a keen knowledge about herbs and how to use them to heal. Lamb had been very impressed by everything that I knew, but he wasn’t surprised. “Julia was a smart lass,” he had told me.

So I lived with him and his wife there for more than eight years, learning about medicine and learning how to speak gaelic without much success until Lamb died with his promise to me that he would never force me to marry someone and that if anyone in the castle planned against it, he would fight for me. Less than six months after his death, I was sent here to marry a stranger.

There was a quiet knock on my door that took me out of my daydream. Mary went to answer the door. “Claire, they’re ready for you to go downstairs.”

Nodding, I looked in the mirror and saw the reflection of a nineteen year old scared english lass who was about to meet a lot of strangers, who were to be her family very soon.

***
A few hours into the night and I still hadn’t met him. I thought maybe it happened this way, maybe I was supposed to meet everyone before I met him. Murtagh, the grumpy man from Leoch who had accompanied us from my castle to here apparently had to keep an eye on me all evening long. He was following me everywhere, introducing me to the guests even if they all knew who I was. At some point in the night, a short skinny man with long dark hair came to see us. He wasn’t one of the guests and he directly went to talk in Murtagh’s hear after giving me a judging look.

I was far from fluent in Gaelic, but I knew enough to understand what he had said. “I can’t find him.” Or at least something like that.

At this moment, I knew that James Fraser’s absence wasn’t something planned and I couldn’t help but be angry at him. Did he really think he could just run away like a thief in the night? Did he think that I had any interest in meeting him? I didn’t have any, but still had come to do what had to be done. He, on the other hand, had decided to do what pleases him, without thinking he wasn’t the only one involved in this.

“The bastard.” I muttered, not loud enough for Murtagh to hear it.

I could see a few men dressed in MacKenzie tartans walking around the hall, looking into the crowd, shrugging at each other and saying that they had no idea where he was.

***

“Are you sure we shouldn’t be going,” Fergus asked Jamie, looking at the castle by the window in the door of the stables.

“Aye, but yer free to go lad. Ye dinna have to stay here wi’ me.”

“You know they are going to come here looking for you?” Fergus closed the window and went to sit next to Jamie on a pile of straw.

“They willna. They’ll leave me alone.” Jamie sat with his arms crossed on his chest and didn’t say anything more for a few minutes.

“It’s cold, here.” Fergus said. The sun had started to set and Jamie could only see the shadow of him in the dark of the stables.

“I told ye to go to the castle if yer to annoy me.” Jamie got up and started to walk around, restless. All he wanted was this night to be over as soon as possible even though he knew this nightmare was only beginning.

“You know you will have to meet her one day.” Fergus said in a french accent. “The wedding is in two days, you can’t hide forever.”

“I’m no’ hiding. And ye dinna have to remind me of that, lad.”

“Sorry.” The boy said with a sigh and laid down. “Well, I will try to sleep, if we are going to stay here all night long.”

***

I woke up very late, the morning after the reception. I was still dressed in my gown, on top of the plaid on my bed. My entire body felt limp, tired after the long days spent on a horseback. I reluctantly got up, tried to tame the wild curls on my head without much success and went downstairs, hoping there was still going to be breakfast to shut the lamentations of my belly.
Still angry at my future husband for not showing up, I was trying to think about a way to make him pay - or at least regret his actions, if such a thing was even possible. Walking between the cold walls of the castle, I tried to come up with something, but my anger was still so strong that all I could reasonably think to do was cut the heart out of his chest and serve it to the animals on the farm for breakfast.

He had humiliated me, making me look like a desperate common girl looking for a husband who wasn’t interested in her, who didn’t even dare come to meet her. He really thought he was better than me, didn’t he? I hadn’t realized that I had started to walk faster, thinking about this man I already hated even if I still hadn’t met him yet.

When I entered the kitchen, there was a man sitting at the counter, eating porridge. His injured hand wasn’t the first thing that caught my attention. He was tall, with broad shoulders and the most gorgeous face I had ever seen in my life. I felt my breath stuck in my lungs at the sight of him and suddenly, all thoughts of James Fraser went out of my mind. He was looking with a beautiful, lopsided smile at one of the cooks in the kitchen.

“Ye’ll have to eat faster than that, laddie, if ye dinna want yer porridge to turn colder than it already is.” She said, her smile showing the gap between her teeth.

He laughed at what she said, the most beautiful sound I had ever heard before. He shook his head, a big mop of red curls flying around as he did. I swallowed, wondering who this man might be. I didn’t know, but I was ready to tell James Fraser to go to hell with a man like that walking in the castle.

Taking my courage in hand, I walked towards him, trying to look more confident that I actually was. “Is there any more porridge?” I asked him, momentarily cursing in my head for using such a bad excuse to talk to him. I never acted like this with men before.

He lifted one red brow in my direction and his honest smile turned into a judging smirk. “Nae, we dinna serve any english breakfast here.” He said, confrontingly looking at me.

Apparently, all the men at Leoch were bastards. Not really different from the Grants, though.

“Excuse me?” I asked, scandalized. “How dare you speak to me like this?”

“Who are ye?” He asked, getting up and giving his plate to the cook. “Thank ye,” he said to her before turning to face me. He was very tall, much more than I was and I was tall for a woman of my time. I had to lift my eyes to look into his beautiful ocean-blue slanted eyes. “I’ve never seen ye here before? Are ye a new maid?”

“A maid? No! I’m a healer!” I said. I wasn’t going to start introducing myself as the future wife of a bastard. A healer was what defined me the most.

“A healer?”

“Yes. And I see you’re injured.” I said, pointing to his left hand wrapped up in cloths. Blood had stained the fabric. “I can help you.” I said, not understanding why I desperately needed to touch him, why I needed to learn more about this man who was clearly making fun of me.

“I’ll no’ let a sassenach lass touch me, I’d be too scared ye’d kill me. Good day to ye.” He nodded and walked out of the kitchen.

I felt blood rise from my chest to my cheeks, feeling completely ridiculous. I walked back to my room, dreaming about escaping this bloody place.
The day of the wedding, I slept until Glenna forced me out of my bed. It was past noon and all the guests were waiting in the hall for the ceremony to begin. Normally, I would have been drunk, had Gleena not taken all the bottles of whisky away from me. I didn’t want to go, I wanted to do just as James Fraser had done to me and leave him alone in front of all the guests, wifeless. I wanted to run away, run back back to Lamb and run back to my parents in Oxford and live a normal life there.

“It will be alright, mo chridhe,” Glenna said while putting my hair up on my head in a bun.

I really wanted to believe her.

Finally, everything was ready and I walked downstairs where my husband would be standing in his MacKenzie tartan. I couldn’t help but feel nervous at the idea of meeting him. I’d be spending the rest of my life married to him, after all. We would share a life, share a bed and probably have children together. Not that I wanted to, but that was how things were here.

I tried to imagine him. I had been told he was of my age. If he was a MacKenzie, he probably had stiff grey hair and a serious face.

Shock would not be a word strong enough to describe how I felt at the sight of him. “You are James Fraser?” I couldn’t help but say it.

The tall red headed man from the kitchen looked as startled as I was. “And ye are Claire Beauchamp.” He said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

He nodded, not looking mad about it, not looking happy about it either. I had hard time reading his face.

“Weel… I’m sorry, then.” He said, looking deep into my eyes. Even if I hated him from the very marrow of my bones, I couldn’t help but feel my knees go weak as he looked at me. Damn you, stop it, Beauchamp.

He was sorry, then. There was still hope after all.

“Sorry for what?” I asked bluntly, even though I knew the answer.

“That we have to marry each other.” He said and turned his back on to me, getting ready to walk to the altar.

I felt my blood boil in my body, wanting nothing but to bleed him to death. I sighed and tried to think of something else, but I couldn’t when he was standing just in front of me. There was a wee curl on the nape of his neck that made me want badly to touch his hair. As much as I hated him, he was still going to be my husband. Hating myself for it, a part of me thought that maybe the sharing a bed part wouldn’t be the hardest thing in this wedding.

James Fraser and I walked to the priest and stood facing each other, in front of a hall filled with hundreds of smiling people. The man talked in gaelic so I didn’t understand much of what he said, but I didn’t need to. The Laird of the Grants had already told me that I was to obey him and do all the things that made me want to punch his handsome cocky face at the moment.

“I, James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser take, thee, Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forth, for better or for worse, in sickness and in
health... Till death us do part.” He said looking straight into my eyes.

Repeating the words after him, I couldn’t help but look down at our linked hands. I wanted to disappear. “I, Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp take, thee, James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forth, for better or worse, in sickness and in health till death do us part.” I finally managed to look up at him after the last word escaped my mouth. He nodded, not letting me read anything on his face.

A man came to take his hand and with his sword, he cut the flesh on our wrist and tied our arms together.

“Say the words after me,” he told me.

I didn’t know what the words meant, but I said them anyway. My gaelic was terrible, rousing small laughs from the crowd, making my cheeks burn red. Trying to ignore them, I just looked into James Fraser’s eyes and repeated after him.

Obviously, he didn’t have a ring, which made a heavy silence fall on the crowd. Finally, the priest told him to kiss me and he did. His lips lasted only seconds on mine, not letting me take the time to close my eyes and we were married.

***

I waited for him all night long.

Music was coming from downstairs where the party was still going strong, everyone waiting until we consummated the wedding. James Fraser was supposed to come up here and we were supposed to do it.

Walking around the room, I couldn’t help but feel nervous about the idea of him coming to lie with me. I was still a virgin, truth be told, and a part - a bigger part than I wanted to admit - of me was looking forward for it. When most girls of my age didn’t even know about sex, I was constantly thinking about it and very badly wanting to do it.

James Fraser was attractive, tall, big and very handsome. He was a bastard, but the idea of sleeping with him, if just to be with someone didn’t bother me that much. But he was a bastard. I didn’t know whether he had been with lasses before -probably, if I had to guess- and the idea of him taking my virginity was bothering me more than I wanted it to. My mixed feelings about this was not helping me calm down every time I heard footsteps in front of my door. Now that it really was time to do it, I felt scared and uncomfortable and just wanted to run away.

Time passed and my husband still hadn’t come to my room. I was growing more anxious while the noises from downstairs were slowly disappearing into the night.

Finally, I was the only one still awake in Leoch, sitting in front of the window looking at the moon lighting the field outside the castle. It was then that I accepted the fact that he would not come. The hate I felt for him wasn’t strong enough to ease the weight in my belly and the wetness between my legs at the thought of having him. I opened the window, hoping the wind of the night would help me find my spirits back. I probably had had too much wine and whisky. Lamb always told me mixing drinks made the heart grow fonder, but that it wasn’t the best concoction.

I finally went to bed, lied under the plaid and thought that maybe it was a good thing that James Fraser wasn’t here. I was ready to try to make it work, between him and I. I wasn’t expecting us to fall deeply in love, but I was hoping that we could figure out an arrangement between the two of
us, a way to make this marriage not a burden. I was ready to try, but I knew in my heart that he, my husband, wasn’t.
I wasn’t expecting things to change between James Fraser and me. Still, I found myself on my way to the stables the morning after our wedding. Maybe I thought that being kind with him was the best way to make him feel bad after last night. To this point, he had been in control of our union and in control of me. Even if I knew that the Bible and all the men in the world wanted it to be this way, I had no intention of letting him do that to me. My hands were shaking and my heart was hammering in my chest at the idea of going to see him. Every time I was around him, I felt like a fool. He made me feel like a fool and I wondered if he liked making me feel this way.

A young boy with curly brown hair was with him, standing by the fence, looking at James Fraser as he turned in circle with a white horse. “Good morning,” I saw him look up from his horse when he heard the sound of my voice. “I’m Claire Fraser,” I said to the boy and couldn’t help but look at Mr. Fraser to see his reaction. He walked in our direction, looking at his feet.

“Good morning,” he looked at the boy and put a bandaged hand on his shoulder. “This is Fergus… he’s a friend of mine. This is… Claire…” he said, looking like he didn’t know how he should introduce me. His cheeks slowly turned pink and he finally looked up at me.


Fergus bowed in front of me. “My pleasure, Madame.”

“You’re not Scottish?” I asked, hearing an accent in his voice that didn’t sound Scottish at all.

“He’s French,” James Fraser said, sounding annoyed. “How can I help ye? We have work to do…”

“I came here to look at your hand,” I said, pointing at his hand with my chin.

“It’s fine, truly, you dinna need to wo —”

“I’m the healer,” I said and walked to a wooden bench by the stables. “Come.”

He sighed and followed me, probably thinking he’d get rid of me faster if he obeyed with what I asked him to do. He sat next to me and I took his big, strong hand. It was wrapped in fabric, soaked with blood. James Fraser grunted when I unwrapped it to look at it. “I think you’ll need stitches…” I said and looked up to find his blue eyes staring at me in amusement. “What?”

“Nothing… I was just wondering where you learned to stitch. Ye ken ‘tis no’ the same as knitting?”

“I do.” I said, wanting to leave his hand in that state and wait until it became infected, so I’d have all the pleasure of amputating it. “You’ll come with me to my surgery, I can’t do it here, I don’t have the tools for it.”

“I canna come… Old Alec will —”

“I don’t think Old Alec wants you to injure your hand to the point where you can’t work with the horses for a few months.”

“It’s fine Milord,” Fergus said. “I’ll watch over them.”
James Fraser was sitting next to my surgery table, his hand open to the ceiling right in front of me. The cut was deep and it looked poorly taken care of. “When did this happen?”

“A few days ago.”

“How?”

It was silent in the room, save for the strong wind from outside the window. “I cut my hand while working wi’ the horses. Ye ken the… thing they have under their paws…”

“A horseshoe, I know. I’m not ignorant…” I grunted.

“Aye, weel… I cut my hand trying to take one off.”

I disinfected the cut, which made him groan, and when I sticked his flesh with my needle he cried out. “A Dhia! Ye hurt me!”

“Yes, I’m afraid being stitched in the hand does hurt a wee bit,” I said between clenched teeth. I still wasn’t regretting him not coming to my room. He was the most arrogant and annoying bastard I had ever met.

Once I was done and gave him the instructions about the balm to put on his hand, he didn’t even thank me and instead walked out of my surgery, grunting to himself.

I had tried to make him feel ashamed for his attitude towards me, but similar to every time I was with him, it seemed he was the one making me angry and feel like a fool.

***

“That’s your wife?” Fergus asked Jamie when they were sitting in the stables, eating a lunch Claire had left for them before taking him to her surgery. “And you are complaining?”

“Dinna talk about things ye dinna understand, laddie,” Jamie said, biting in a piece of bread.

“When I force ye to marry a lass, ye’ll no’ say the same,” he said with dark humour.

“You will not do that, I know.”

They stayed in silence for a moment, enjoying the taste of the fresh food. It was better than eating grass, Jamie thought.

“And you didn’t go to her bed last night? You should have.”

Jamie’s cheeks were burning red at the thought. He felt bad about doing it, he really did. He was angry at his uncle for forcing him into marrying a lass, no matter how pretty she was. Colum was breaking the vow he made to Jamie’s late father of never making Jamie marry out of love. He’d be lying to himself if he said he hadn’t been tempted to go to her room, but he didn’t want to show his uncle that he had done something great in making him marry a lass from clan Grant. And a sassenach, that is.

“It’s no’ of yer business.”

“No, but you are of my concern,” Fergus said, clapping his shoulder. Jamie couldn’t help but smile
everytime the boy acted like his father. “And I’m afraid for your security.”

“My security?” He asked with furrowed brows. “What do ye mean?”

“Um… didn’t you see the look on your wife’s face?”

“Dinna use that word…” he said, blushing deeper.

“What word? Face?” Fergus laughed at Jamie before taking a bite. He didn’t speak for a while, making Jamie wonder what the boy had seen on her face. He tried to tell himself that it didn’t matter, that he wasn’t going to surrender to her, but a part of him still terribly wanted to know.

“It doesna matter, Fergus. Anyway… lasses dinna care about it.” He shrugged and got up, ready to go back to work, but mostly trying to find a way to change the subject. It always made him uncomfortable when he talked about that with an eleven-year-old lad who knew more about it than him, who was almost twenty.

“Who told you that?” The lad asked, following him to the horses.

“Murtagh… And many men before the… the wedding,” he said, sounding annoyed just by the mention of it.

Fergus laughed, making Jamie turned around and cross his arms on his chest. “What now?”

“They’re wrong. On the contrary, lasses care about it, it’s just that the men are too pigheaded to notice.” Fergus walked to the horse and took one to the training field.

He had gotten his attention and curiosity, but he didn’t want Fergus to notice. Jamie casually walked to him. “How do you ken?” Even if he was good at keeping a straight face, his blushing cheeks were betraying him.

“The women at Madame Elise used to say it all the time. They told me about things that women like men to tell them,” Fergus grinned, clearly seeing all on Jamie’s face.

“Like what?” He shrugged, taking the horse’s leach with his uninjured hand.

“Why do you want to know?”

Jamie looked up at the young boy with an annoyed face, making Fergus’ smile grow wilder. “I knew it! Stop pretending you are not interested in Madame Fraser,” he mocked Jamie, saying Claire’s name in French.

“No, I’m no’!” He said, but still felt a pinch in his stomach at the thought of her being his wife, the same pinch he felt the first time he saw her in the kitchen. “But she’s my wife… one day I’ll have to…”

“You make it sound like it was some… field work! You’ll enjoy it better than your hand, trust me!”

Jamie’s cheeks turned crimson red and he was about to let go of this conversation when Fergus began telling him what women did enjoy. “They like it when you take your time. Marie-Louise, one of the women at Madame Elise, always said that. And they like it when you are gentle with them, don’t be a beast. And they like it when you tell them they have nice, big breasts.”

“What?” Jamie asked scandalized, looking around to see if someone had heard him. “Christ
Fergus. I canna believe you ken so much about it.”

“Well, you’ll thank me later,” the boy winked at him.

***

Colum MacKenzie had asked him to come to his office in the afternoon. When Jamie entered, his uncle was standing by the window, looking at the lands that belonged to him. He was stroking the back of his bird and didn’t turn around when he heard him come in. He stayed in silence for what seemed like eternity until he finally spoke. “I heard you didn’t go to Claire Fraser’s room last night.”

Jamie felt his cheeks turn red, trying to understand how his uncle knew and growing annoyed that his private life wasn’t private anymore. He didn’t believe Claire had told him, unless she was more wicked than he thought. “Who told ye that?” Jamie answered, not knowing if it was the right thing to say, but it was the first thing that came to his mind.

“I talked to her maids. They said that there were no… signs of the presence of a man in her bed.”

“Are ye spying on me?”

His uncle turned around, looking at him with a straight face and not showing the anger that was boiling in him, which only scared Jamie more. “Are you trying to humiliate me? First ye do not go meet her, then you dinna give her a wedding ring, and now you don’t even consummate the wedding!”

“I have no money for a ring, ye ken that! In fact, I don’t even have enough money to have a wife!”

Colum painfully walked to him with his injured legs and put a finger on his nephew’s chest. “Ye’ll start acting like an actual husband to her! I dinna want her to send word to the Grant clan that you are not doing your part of the agreement. This wedding was supposed to ease the tensions, and I dinna want you to create some! Ye have work to do, Jamie!”

“My father would have never agreed to this!” Jamie screamed, not able to hold back his anger. “Ye made a promise to him! You promised him that ye’d let me chose the lass I’ll marry. Ye broke yer word and now my father is probably turning in his grave!”

“Yer father would think about the clan first too!”

“No, he wouldn’t and ye ken fine well!”

Colum didn’t respond, looking at his nephew whose face was red with anger. “Maybe ye dinna care about yer clan… but think about her. Your wife. What do ye think she’s thinking of all of this?” He walked back to his bird, slowly calming down. “Tonight, the Duke of Sandringham is coming for a feast. I want ye to act like a husband to her. Do not embarrass us, Jamie Fraser, or ye won’t ever set foot on yer mother’s lands again. Remember that ye have nowhere else to go.”

“Dinna talk about my mother. Ye tried to do the same to her. I’m glad she had the balls to run away.” On that note, Jamie turned around and banged the door shut behind him.

***

Of course, James Fraser was nowhere to be seen at the reception. I had met the Duke and thought that he was a very… sophisticated character, just by meeting him the first time. He had congratulated me on my wedding, asking me who my husband was. “James Fraser. Have you ever
met him?”

“Oh… I have… I am very fond of him,” he said with a face that made me wonder how exactly fond the Duke was of him.

“Where is he?” He asked, looking behind my shoulder, searching for the sight of a tall red headed scot.

“He’s… uh…”

“Good evening, Sir,” James Fraser said, coming out of nowhere and putting a hand on the small of my back. Surprised, I looked up at him to see that he was wearing a clean shirt and that he had shaved.

They chatted for a while, but all this time I was only thinking about James Fraser’s big hand on my back and the heat that was emanating from it, warming up my whole body. Finally, what seemed like hours later, the Duke left us alone and went to talk with a clansman.

I turned to face him, trying to find something to say, but the grin he was offering me was distracting me from every coherent thought in my mind. “How’s your hand?” I asked, feeling a little stupid.

“It hurts like hell,” he said honestly.

“I told you not to use it for work, but of course, you would not listen to me. Why would you, after all? I’m only your healer… and your wife, that is.”

His smile slowly disappeared into the most bored face I had ever seen in my life. “I was trying to be nice, ye ken. Ye really canna leave people in peace for two minutes, can you?”

Turning my back to him, I looked into the crowd of people reunited in the hall, hoping to find something to say back to him.

“I was going to apologize,” he said in my ear.

“About what? That we had to get married?” I turned around to see blood creep on his neck.

“About last night.”

“Last night?” I shrugged, pretending to ignore what he was talking about and trying to look as disinterested about it as I could. “Nothing happened last night.”

“Aye.That’s why I wanted to apologize… and I wanted to tell you that if ye wanted me to come to yer room tonight, I dinna mind d —”

“Are you fucking serious?” I said, like my father used to when he thought I wasn’t around. “You cannot be serious, and if you are, let me tell you James Fraser that you are…” I tried to find something that would best describe him, but I could only come up with “bastard”. “You think you can just come and… tell me everything I should do? Go… screw yourself!”

His face was red with either shame or anger, I didn’t know, but it was very satisfying, even if I felt a little bad for him. I told myself I had no reason to feel this way. He clearly didn’t feel bad about all the times he made me look like a fool, so why should I?

“Whatever… I was just trying to be kind.” He grunted and walked away from me.
The evening went on and I wondered whether I really had ruined the chance that James Fraser and I could start trying to get along. He had apologized, and maybe he really had proposed to come to my bed to see if I wanted to. Now, he was sitting in front of me, talking to a man named Willie next to him and completely ignoring me. The people around us at the table were not really interested in talking to me either. They had all been kind to me for my arrival to the castle, but since that reception, it was like I was a ghost. They didn’t see me and didn’t care to talk to me.

The dinner was served and James Fraser continued the conversation in Gaelic, knowing that I wasn’t fluent. He spoke Gaelic until he started talking to the woman sitting next to me about sassenachs, pretending that they didn’t have a sassenach sitting right in front of them. I wanted to die. I knew he did it to humiliate me. Again. I swallowed tears of anger and despair; I was so tired of this twisted game he was playing with me. Just traveling through Scotland to marry a stranger had drained me already. Now, I had to deal with a stranger that was pulling my pigtails all the time. All I wanted was to leave this feast — I wasn’t even hungry — and go to my room and spend the night talking with Mary and Glenna.

“I heard sassenachs canna hold their alcohol,” said the big, disgusting man sitting by James Fraser. “Is that true?”

My husband looked deep into my eyes, making everyone around us turn to me. “Well… I dinna ken about all the sassenachs, but some I ken…”

Everyone burst into laughter, almost choking on their meat. I felt blood rise from my chest to my cheek as we looked at each other. He was smirking, as if daring me to say something. I simply got up, my plate not even half finished. “I’m very tired. I had a long week. I’m sorry.”

On my way out, I met the gaze of Colum MacKenzie, whose face turned red when he looked from me to James Fraser.
A few days after the reception for the Duke of Sandringham, I was walking around the castle collecting herbs, enjoying a rare sunny day.

I hadn’t spoken to James Fraser after what happened at the dinner and had no interest in doing so. If he wanted it to be this way, then it was going to be this way. I was tired of fighting an already lost battle and, anyway, I didn’t care much. Many were the girls who wished their husbands had no interest in them or in their bodies, so I considered myself lucky. Too bad for him, it was his loss. I had a roof, an important position as the healer, and much work to do with new patients every day. I had no time to worry about him.

Walking by the stream behind the castle, I closed my eyes and listened to the calming sound of the rushing water. It felt peaceful, and for a moment I forgot about everything. Sitting down, I put my basket next to me and laid on the grass, bathing under the sunlight. I didn’t know whether I fell asleep or not, but at some point I was roused by the sound of footsteps near me. Opening my eyes, I blinked, trying to remember where I was. I sat up and saw him.

He emerged out of the water, his soaked hair falling on his shoulders. He caught his breath and threw his hair back to put it away from his face. He had water dripping down to his waist, drops sliding down his body. I tried to look away, but I was captivated by him. He was big. He looked better than he did with clothes on. His shoulders were straight and his muscles sculpted like a Greek god.

Before I could figure out what was going on, he walked out of the stream to where his clothes were lying on the grass. I stood up and was prepared to walk away, but when he turned around, my breath caught in my throat. I had seen naked men before, but not one so close, and I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I felt my belly tighten at the sight. Even if I had tried to push it away, the need for him came back to me in a rush that made me feel dizzy. I must have made a sound, for he looked up and after a few seconds of frozen shock, put a hand on his privates, swearing in Gaelic. “What the devil are you doing here?” He asked, trying to reach to his kilt with only one free hand.

“I was… uh…” I stammered, feeling a crimson red flush creep on my neck and cheeks. “What are you doing here?”

He managed to put on his shirt and walked to me, probably as flushed as I was. “Didn’t ye see that I was here?”

“No! I was just there, I didn’t hear you come. Maybe if you want to bathe naked you should walk up the stream where you’d be sure no one sees you.” Unless he wanted me to see him. He knew I came here to collect herbs. No, impossible, I told myself and waved the thought away.

“Ye should have looked away!”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I was a little surprised. I wasn’t expecting you to get out... naked of the stream!”

He stood with his hands clenching his kilt against him, looking around as if trying to find somewhere to go. “Leave. I need to change.”

“Well, you leave. I need to pick up some herbs.”

“Please, this is verra embarrassing.”
“Embarrassing? This is embarrassing?” I screamed at him. He looked quite surprised at my reaction. “Let me tell you about embarrassment. Don’t you see how you’ve been treating me since I arrived here? Like if I was some circus clown! All you did was humiliate me in front of everybody at Leoch. I’m supposed to be your wife, for Christ’s sake! I’m not expecting your love or anything, but just an ounce of respect and civility would be fine.”

He looked down at his feet, his cheeks burning red in shame. Or at least, I hoped it was. I felt bad for him, I didn’t know why and I knew I shouldn’t but he really did look ashamed.

“Look, Fraser, time is going to pass very slow if we don’t at least try to just… talk to each other. I’m not expecting anything from you, alright? I just wish this could be a peaceful ground, not a battlefield. We both are stuck in this marriage, and I’m not happier about it than you are, and —”

“I get it,” he interrupted me.

“Will you let me finish please?” I sighed, crossing my arms on my chest. He nodded. “Thank you. I just wanted to say that maybe we could try to be friends, at least. Maybe things would be easier this way.”

He looked up at me, the corner of his mouth curling up. His face, which had been serious since the day I first met him, seemed to relax a bit, and the hard traits of his face softened. He was even more handsome this way. No, he was beautiful. “Ye really want to be my friend?”

“Well… If I had a choice, no.” I couldn’t help but smile when he looked up at me, his eyes playful. “But since we’re in this together, yes.”

He nodded and ran a hand through his wet curls. “We can try. I think our personalities are both verra strong. It willna be easy, but I’m ready to try.”

***

Jamie didn’t care about Colum anymore. His need of proving to him that he had been wrong suddenly disappeared after his talk with Claire that afternoon by the stream. He didn’t know why or what she had done, but he felt like she had cast a spell on him. The days following this encounter, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. It had been subtle at first — wide smiles when he met her in the hallways of the castle, which then slowly evolved into thinking about her while he worked with the horses. He thought about her smile. He had seen it for the first time that afternoon, and it haunted him. It was the most beautiful smile he had ever seen and he realized that the only thing he looked forward to when he woke up was seeing it again. Then, she started haunting his dreams. He dreamt of her, simply seeing her face bathed by the sun, looking at him with her dreamy whisky eyes. Sometimes, he touched her, putting a rebel soft curl behind her ear, feeling the warmth of her hands on him as she healed his hand. Sometimes — and he was ashamed of even thinking about it — he dreamt of her naked body against him. He dreamed of kissing her, of giving his body to her, of being inside of her. He’d wake up then, with a painful cockstand and a blushed face, thinking about his dream.

Whatever she was, whatever she had done, whether she cast a spell on him or simply enchanted him, it had worked. He was in love with her.

***

I was in my surgery ordering the new concoctions I had made when I heard a small knock on the door. “It’s open!” I shouted, not looking up from my book. It was an old, very old surgical book that belonged to the previous healer and probably a few before him as well.
“Are you the healer?” Asked a soft feminine voice.

Looking up, I saw a girl standing on the stairs, fearfully looking around the surgery. I had to admit it looked like a dungeon where bad things happened. There wasn’t much lighting, but a lot of scary shadows.

“Indeed I am. Can I help you?”

She had a cut on her middle finger. It was deep, I was going to need to suture, but by seeing the ghostly look on the girl’s face, I was afraid she’d faint.

She was sitting in front of me, her grey eyes round with fear. “Don’t worry,” I smiled. “It will hurt a bit, but it soon will be over.” She nodded. I had disinfected the wound and was ready to start the suturing. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she said with a confidence that surprised me, considering the pale colour of her face.

She flinched, but never said a word as I worked. “So, what is your name? I have never seen you around.” I asked, trying to make her think about something else than the needle in her flesh.

“Malva. Malva Christie. I’ve just arrived to the castle with my father and brother.”

“Are you travelers?”

“Aye. Well, we’re looking for somewhere to stay, where my father and brother could work. He used to be a professor in Edinburgh, but…” her face darkened.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

She shook her head and waved her uninjured hand. “It’s fine. My mother died a few weeks ago. My father couldna bear the city after it. He needed a change.”

“I think I heard that Colum is looking for a new teacher for the kids of the castle.”

She hadn’t noticed that I was done suturing her hand. I wrapped a bandage around it.

“Aye, that’s why we came.”

I smiled and got up to put some balm into a little jar. I gave her my instructions and told her to come see me a few days later.

She did and arrived just as a man was bleeding on the ground of my surgery. He had broke his arms and I had just put it back into place and did the best of a cast that I could. “Oh, Malva! Hi. Wait a minute please, it won’t be long.” I was afraid this would scare her to death, but on the contrary, when I took the stitches off she said she had found my methods very interesting.

“Do you have any interest in healing?” I asked her.

“Aye,” she said with a shy smile.

“Well… Why don’t you come and join me tomorrow morning? You could spend the day with me and I could teach you some of my technics. What do you say?”

A smile lit her face and she nodded enthusiastically. “Aye, I’d love to.”

Malva came the day after, and I found her presence pleasant. I was used to spending all my days
alone in this dungeon, and having someone else with me, someone as witty and interesting as Malva, was refreshing. At the end of the day, we decided that she’d come back soon and that I’d teach her more of my knowledge.

It wasn’t long before we became friends. She was younger than me, but she was mature and I found myself talking to her. About everything, but mostly about James Fraser. He had not bothered me since the afternoon at the river, but I still felt the need to talk. I had nobody to speak to. Mary and Glenna were kind, but I didn’t feel as if they would understand me. I didn’t know if Malva understood when I talked about my worries and problems with Jamie, but she listened.

I went back to my surgery after supper, as there were some things I wanted to finish before going to sleep. When I finally left for my room, it was already dark in the castle hallways. I wasn’t scared, but I didn’t feel at peace. I was still a sassenach and an outlander, even if I was married to the nephew of the Laird.

I finally arrived to my room, meeting Jamie just in front of the doors of our rooms. His room was right next to mine.

He smiled shyly at me. I didn’t know what had happened to him, but since our talk by the stream he was completely different. He was kind and polite with me, always smiling and even blushing when we talked. He was far from the cocky bastard I had become acquainted with during my first days at the castle. It was much more pleasant this way.

“Good evening,” he said.

This shy attitude he had with me was very attractive. I smiled back, feeling my cheeks turn red. Fortunately, it was too dark, even with some candles lit, for him to notice it.

“Good evening,” I smiled, absentmindedly putting a curl behind my ear. “How was the performance?” A singer from another clan had come to sing in front of the castle. I had left a few songs after he began to go to my surgery.

“Good. I saw ye leaving early.”

“I went to my surgery. There was stuff I wanted to do.”

“I heard ye have a new friend.”

“Yes. Malva. You know her?”

“I ken her father, Tom. My father was acquainted with him when he was working in Edinburgh.”

He didn’t have a glass face like I did, but still, I could see the lines on his face harden. “You don’t seem quite happy about it.”

He shrugged and smiled. “As long as they help us. Weel… Have a good night, then.”

“Good night.”

He waited until I got into my room to open his door. I slowly undressed, looking at the fire started in the fireplace of my bedroom. Mary and Glenna had been here. There was a clean shift on my bed and the room was warm. I didn’t really like having maids, as I grew up in a little house in England where my parents and I had to do everything ourselves. But they had been doing it all their lives and didn’t understand my awkwardness with it, so I didn’t blame them.
Jumping into bed, I opened the curtains to let the heat radiate on me. I relaxed, feeling the weight of the day leave my body and my ribs ache after being liberated from the corset. My eyelids were heavy as I watched the flames of the fire dance. My mind drifted to James Fraser and the change in his attitude. He was kind, when he wanted to be. And fun. I had talked to him a few times after the afternoon by the river and every time he was like a gentlemen, very different from the man I thought he was. I was glad that he had accepted my request to try and be friends, but at the speed in which my attraction for him was growing — a speed I thought was likely the same from him — it wouldn’t be long until we’d cross a line. We were married, after all.

I laid my head on the pillow and closed my eyes, listening to the reassuring sound of the wind outside, and fell asleep in seconds. I dreamed of James Fraser being here, not behind the wall that was separating us.

***

The morning after, he knocked at my door while I was bathing. “A minute!” I shouted and got up, putting a tartan around me. When I opened the door and his eyes drifted on my almost naked — and wet — body, his cheeks turned flaming red. He stood frozen for a second and cleared his throat. “Uh… Colum wants to see us in his office.”

“Now?”

He nodded, clearly avoiding to look below my chin.

“Alright, let me get dressed.”

Colum was facing the window, stroking the back of the bird hanging next to him. “Ye came,” he said and turned around to face us. “I asked ye to come because I want ye,” he said looking straight at Jamie, “to take your wife on a trip. When I die, she might become the Lady of Leoch. And she is a MacKenzie now. It would be a shame if she didn’t know the wonderful lands we possess.” My husband nodded, not understanding what his uncle meant. “I want ye to take a few days to travel around the lands of the clan. Ye’ll be leaving tomorrow.”

“But… I can’t leave. The surgery, if people are sick…”

“We’ve lived fine well without a healer for a few years, Madame. A few days willna hurt anyone. Besides, the young Christie spends a lot of time wi’ ye, she probably will ken a bit about burns and cuts until ye come back.”

“I can’t leave her alone to deal with this!”

“She’s no’ alone. There are a few wise women in Cranesmuir. Dinna fash.”

We walked out of his office and headed to the kitchen. We already had blankets, food, and clothes packed, and the horses were waiting for us. “That is so like my uncle,” James Fraser said. I could see he was angry at him, his face turning a shade of red I had never seen on him.

“Why is he doing this?”

“He wants us to connect. See, when I… humiliated ye… I humiliated him as well. He wants to make sure we bond and he doesna have to worry about me again.”

“You know, for a second there, I thought he cared for me. But you know, men these days,” I said as we walked to the stables.
We climbed on our mount and looked behind our shoulders to see Fergus wave at us with a grin on his face as we rode away from the castle.
We spent the first few hours in silence, simply looking at the breathtaking view. I had never really explored Scotland, even though I had lived there for almost ten years. When I lived with the Grants, I barely left the castle, let alone leave its lands. Besides going from England to Scotland, I had never really traveled before.

“Do you know the lands well?” I finally asked him. He seemed at ease, peaceful, now that Leoch was out of sight. His face was relaxed and he seemed to move more gracefully than he did before.

“I do.”

“But you’re not a MacKenzie. At least, your father wasn’t.” I had been wondering a lot about my husband’s history. I didn’t know anything about him, let alone his past and ties to the clan. My question didn’t seem to please him, though. His face darkened and he looked down. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked,” I corrected.

He looked at me and his mouth relaxed in a small smile. “It’s just that I didna really like to talk about it. But, you couldn’t have known. Dinna worry.” He didn’t say more, so I let him ride in his silence. I felt that he wanted to say something — either trying to find a way to express his thoughts, or simply thinking about something else to say to change the conversation.

“My parents died a few years ago. My father was accused for a murder he didna commit. The Watch came to our house one day, burnt it down, and brought him with them to hang him. My mother escaped wi’ my sister and me, but she went back to him. They escaped with help of a few of my father’s tenants, but were killed by English soldiers a few days later, when they were coming to meet us.”

I swallowed hard, feeling goosebumps rise on my skin. Redcoats. “I’m so sorry,” I said, my voice barely audible.

He shrugged, but I could see this event was still painful to him, and with reason. “I hate them to the very marrow of my bones, the Redcoats.”

They weren’t more popular with the MacKenzies than they were with the Grants. “Is that why you hate me?”

“I dinna hate ye,” he smiled shyly.

“You did when we met.”

“I hated him, my uncle,” he looked at me, his eyes honest. “He kent my father, he kent he would have never forced me to marry a lass, but he did. My father trusted him, but he broke his trust. I could never forgive him for it. And I must admit, I thought that marrying a sassenach was rather… ironic, in a bad way. At first, I was angry. I thought maybe my uncle was sending a message of some sort.” He shook his head and smiled sadly. “But I didna think it was the case.”

“Are you still angry?”

“I’m angry at my uncle for betraying my father, but… only about that.”

We rode in silence again, and I kept thinking about what he had said about his uncle breaking his father’s trust. “I lived with my uncle, too. He had promised to me that he’d never force me to marry
someone. See, my family was a bit… ahead of its time, if I can say it that way.” I saw him frown but continued with my story. “But then he died, and six months later I’m here, coming to meet my future husband I had never met.”

“The bastard,” he shook his head.

“I know. Lairds aren’t really what I’d call honorable.”

“Nae, but my father was.” He started talking about his father and, by the joy on his face, I could see he admired him. He talked about how his uncles wanted his mother to marry a man from another clan, but had instead ran away with his father. He asked me about my parents, and I didn’t realize until then that I was smiling just like him. It felt good to talk about it — about them, my family, and the burden of their absence in my life. I had never shared it with anyone — and by the way the words flooded out of James Fraser’s mouth, I guessed he hadn’t either.

When the sun started to set down, we made camp for the night. He went to pick up branches as I put the blankets in a spot that would shield us from the wind. I didn’t know whether I should build two tents, but when I unrolled them and saw that there was material only for one, I didn’t ask more questions.

He came back and started the fire. “Ah, James?” I asked.

“Ye can call me Jamie, ye ken.”

I smiled and came to kneel besides him. “Right, Jamie. How long is this trip going to last?”

“As long as ye wish. Well, ye have to calculate the time to come back… but when ye want to leave, we leave. Why? Ye’re worrying about your surgery?”

“No, I just wanted to know.” I did worry about the surgery, but that wasn’t my biggest concern. My concern was the small tent we were going to sleep in, alone in the wilderness.

So that was what Colum had in mind. Perhaps he wanted me to get back pregnant, while we were at it.

Jamie seemed to notice my concern when he saw the small tent. “There’s only one?”

I nodded and walked to the horse to get the food. “Yes. I think he’s scared we’ll freeze to death.”

He smiled politely, but I saw his cheeks turn red. “Uh… Claire…” he scratched the back of his neck. “I dinna want you to think… I ken we’re married and havena…. uh… consummated the wedding, but…. uh…”

“Cut the corners, Jamie.”

“Weel, dinna think that this trip is all about us…. doing… it. Weel, at least no’ for me.”

I couldn’t help but burst into laughter, which seemed to surprise him. “I wouldn’t think so. It’s much more complicated this way.”

“Right, but I didna want ye to think I have any interest in… uh… doing this with ye… weel, no’ that I dinna want to… I mean, yes, I do if ye do, but I’m not forcing ye and if ye—”

“Jamie,” I put a hand on his arm. “Relax. It’s fine. I see what Colum wants. The idea of being alone with you doesn’t make me uncomfortable. Besides, if you really wanted to do it with me, you’d
have come to my room on our wedding night,” I said teasingly, with a touch of reproach, but he didn’t seem to find it funny.

“Alright,” he said, blushing.

We ate by the fire, a plaid around our shoulders. It wasn’t a cold night, but the wind was fresh. I often complained about the dresses and all their layers, but at that moment, I appreciated every one of them.

We didn’t speak, listening to the sound of the night, easing our worries about everything related to the castle and our duties. I saw that Jamie was looking at me with a smile. “What?” I asked.

“Ye like to be outside. Ye’re at ease and ye seem to know what to do. And ye smile a lot when you’re outside.”

“I do,” I said sheepishly. “When I was young, I traveled with my parents around England. We spent many nights under the stars.”

I looked up at the sky and couldn’t help but feel breathless by its beauty. It was now dark and the stars were shining. There were millions of them. He was still staring at me when I looked back at him. “What about you? If you grew up in a farm, you must love the outdoors.”

“I do.”

We didn’t speak until we decided to go to sleep. It was a bit awkward to sleep right beside each other. I wanted him and I knew I could have him. We were alone, there was nothing against us, and we were married. But something was stopping me. Maybe it was the awkwardness between the two of us. We were strangers, after all. Not even friends yet.

He laid down next to me and I turned on my side, my back to him. He did the same. It was uncomfortable, but it was the safest way. I felt safe next to him, protected from the danger of the world. The fire was warming the inside of our little tent, but I thought that there was more heat radiating from Jamie than from the fire. “Good night,” he said with a soft voice.

“Good night,” I answered and fell immediately asleep. It had been a long day.

***

I woke up in the night feeling my heart in my throat. Jamie was sound asleep on his back next to me, his hand on his chest raising along with his soft breath.

Getting up without making a sound, I walked away from the campsite and with a hand resting on a tree, I emptied my stomach.

I was feeling nauseous and dizzy, my head spinning around. Running the back of my hand on my mouth, I let out a deep sigh. “Please, I don’t want to be sick,” I whispered in a small prayer, closing my eyes. It was just our first day of traveling and I didn’t want to go back to the castle already. I wanted to spend more time with Jamie, outside of the walls of the castle.

A hand on my back surprised me, making me turn around and slap my attacker in the face.

“Oww!” Jamie said, putting a hand on his cheek.

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry,” I said, feeling my cheeks turn red in shame, “I didn’t think it was you.”
He grunted, rubbing the palm of his hand on his face. "'Tis fine. Are ye no' feeling alright?" he asked. I could only see the shadow of him in the dim light of the morning.

"I think it’s the dinner from last night. I’m alright, actually I feel better now," I lied.

We went back by the campfire and he put more wood into the fire. I was freezing, wrapping the plaid around my shoulder. Jamie came to sit next to me, offering me water. I drank slowly and gave it back to him. He smiled reassuringly at me while taking the bottle from my hand. His hair was standing on top of his head and he had circles under his eyes. "I’m sorry if I woke you up."

He shook his head. "Dinna fash, it’s nae worry. Are ye sure ye’re alright? Ye look quite white."

I put a hand on my forehead, taking a deep breath, feeling the nausea come back. I turned to lie down, my head close to the fire to stay warm. "I’ll just… lay down a bit…" I said, immediately falling asleep.

When I opened my eyes later, Jamie was packing our stuff. I looked at him for a moment, his long legs carrying him around the fire, his hair moving with the wind in it. He turned around, probably feeling my eyes on him, and came to bend down next to me. He put a hand on my forehead, pushing the curls away from my sweaty face. I felt a shiver run down my spine at his touch and my eyelashes fluttered — it was the first time he touched me since our wedding, the first time he touched me for real. "We are going back to Leoch. Ye’re sick, we can’t continue travelling."

I sat up and he let his hand go. The wind felt cold against the burning sensation his hand had left on my face. "I’m alright, really."

The sun was now up in the sky, hiding behind grey clouds. He raised one red eyebrow, his mouth curling up. "Are ye sure?"

"Yes."

He got up. "Alright, get up then," he said, his hands resting on his hips.

“What?”

“Get up. If ye don’t feel too dizzy, of course.”

I bit my lower lip and did as he told me to. I didn’t know how, but I managed to get up on my own. I pretended my vision wasn’t blurred and smiled. "Alright," he said.

We didn’t ride away from the castle for long. It was the hardest thing I had ever done in my whole life. My entire body was shaking from exhaustion and was soaked with sweat. Just sitting straight on a horse was grueling. I was still feeling nauseous and like my head wanted to explode. At some point, my vision blurred and I slowly fell off my horse.

***

Jamie saw her fall off her horse from the corner of his eye. "Christ," he stopped and jumped off his horse, running to her side. He was scared she might have hurt herself while falling. She laid unconscious on the ground, burning with fever.

He lifted her up and put her on his horse before sitting behind her. He laid her head on his chest and, while holding the reigns of her horse, left in the direction of the castle.

***
I didn’t know how long I stayed unconscious, but when I opened my eyes, Mary let out a sigh of relief and informed all the women in my room that I was awake.

Blinking, I looked around to see Glenna sitting on the other side of my bed, holding my hand. “We were sae scared! Dinna do this to us ever again, Claire!” Opening my mouth to speak, my voice was caught in my dry throat. “Wait, let me give ye some tea.” Glenna brought a cup of cold tea to my lips. I drank a long sip, almost choking on it. “Easy, easy,” she said, wiping my mouth with a cloth.

“What happened?” My voice was hoarse, sounding strange to me.

“Ye were ill. It was a bad thing. If you end up living, it’s because of Miss Christie.” Glenna said. I looked up her shoulder and saw Malva smiling at me.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling my eyelids heavy. “I’m tired.”

“Ye can sleep, dearie. You need to gain yer strength back.”

I slept a lot during the following days, but as time went by, I spent less time in bed and more time around the castle. For almost a week, I had been ill, burning with fever and restlessly sleeping. I didn’t know what had caused this illness, but during my days in bed, I ran down a list in my head of what drink or food might have done it and I couldn’t think of anything.

Poison.

For whatever reason, I spent more time thinking about any concoctions or plants that could have caused this. A few days later, I was walking around the castle on my way to the gardens, determined to clear every suspicion of poisoning out of my head.

I thought about not only what, but also who could have wanted to poison me. I was so lost in my thoughts, when I turned the corner of the hallway, I didn’t see the giant Scot walking in my direction. “Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!” I exclaimed, bumping into him.

He closed his arms around me to keep me from falling, his big warm hands resting on the small of my back. I looked up to see Jamie smiling at me. “Claire, I’m glad to see ye back on yer feet.”

He seemed to realize he was holding me in his arms, so he let go of me and took a shy step back, his cheeks turning red. “Yes, it’s good to be back.” I realized that I had passed out just in front of him and that he had had to carry me all the way back to the castle. “I’m sorry…I shouldn’t have said I wanted to continue.”

“Ye still would have fainted anyway,” he shrugged.

“Right,” I smiled, his presence making me feel nervous in the most dizzying and amazing way. My head was spinning around, but it wasn’t because of the illness. Jamie was genuinely smiling at me, his blue eyes kind and relieved to see me back. I felt a tickling in my belly, my knees going weak. I cleared my voice, “well, thanks for bringing me back here.”

“The only thing that matters now is that ye are well,” he smiled and put a hand on my shoulder. “Where were ye going walking like that? Shouldn’t ye rest a wee bit?”

“I was on my way to the garden.”
He laughed, bending his head to scratch the back of his neck. “I think the garden can survive without ye, Claire. At least for a few days.”

“I just wanted to see that everything was alright. Do you want to come with me?” The words came out of my mouth before I even thought about them. I initially regretted asking him, but when his smile grew wider on his face and he nodded, I felt my heart beam in my chest.

We walked in silence to the garden. I didn’t want to tell Jamie about my suspicions, because it was what it was. Suspicions. I had no proof that someone had tried to poison me, and if I started talking about it, everyone in the castle would know and would be looking for a witch to burn. I trusted Jamie, but in a place like this, a secret didn’t stay one for a very long time. At the same time, if someone had really wanted to poison me, I had to stay on my guard.

“I wanted to apologize,” Jamie said. We stopped by the stream next to the castle and sat under the sun. “For the way I acted wi’ ye when ye arrived. I am ashamed of it.” His cheeks were crimson red and his head was bent in shame.

Smiling, I felt relieved to hear him say it. His attitude had changed a lot in the past weeks and I was happy to see that he trusted me now. “Thank you.” He lifted his eyes to look at me and smiled shyly.

He hadn’t shaved since our return to the castle and his beard was the longest I’d ever seen on him. It was red, just like his hair, and the sun made it look like it was glittering. He was really beautiful.

“Since you didn’t have time to show me more of the MacKenzie lands, do you think we’ll be able to go back one day?”

“Travel on a horseback in muddy Scotland? Yes, I’m sure.”
My feet guided me to Jamie’s room one cold summer night.

Ever since our talk by the river, I didn’t recognize him. He had completely changed in a good way, for the first time making me feel welcomed in his castle.

That night during dinner, his eyes never left me. I could feel his stare weighing on me in a way that made me feel butterflies in my stomach and that made my heart hammer in my chest. I tried not to look at him, but I barely succeeded. Whenever I met his eyes, he never looked away. Instead, he’d only smile kindly in response, making me blush like a teenager who had a crush. As I thought about it more, I came to the conclusion that a lovestruck teenager was what I was.

He wasn’t sitting next to me, ironically making my need to be close to him even stronger. I watched him talk with his friends, the candles on the table lighting his slanted blue eyes. Every time he looked in my direction and smiled at me, I felt electricity run from my toes to my head. I wanted him more than I had ever wanted anyone before.

So when I restlessly laid in bed that night, listening to the sound of the wind outside, I told myself my place wasn’t in this room.

Getting up, I put the MacKenzie tartan around my shoulders and walked to his room. The floor was cold under my bare feet, making me close the tartan around my chest.

I knocked on Jamie’s door, hearing nothing but the beating of my heart in my ears. He moved in the room, his footsteps echoing as he walked to the door. “Who is it?” he asked. When he opened the door, I couldn’t say whether he was surprised or relieved to see it was me. “Claire,” he said.

He was half shaved and half naked. The left side of his face was covered with soap, while the other was clean. “Can I come in?”

He blinked, frozen for a second before nodding and letting me enter his room. There was a fire in the chimney, and the table where he was shaving was located right next to it. I turned around when Jamie came to stand behind me. Smiling shyly, I looked around, trying to find something to say. “You were shaving.”

Obviously.

“Aye,” he scratched the back of his nape, his head slightly bent.

“What do you need help?”

“Help? Ye ken how to shave a man?” he asked, frowning.

I walked to the table and took the razor. “Yes, my father taught me how when he injured his arm.
Come now.”

The corner of his mouth curled up and he walked to sit in front of me. “Try not to cut my throat open.”

“Hopefully, I won’t.”

He shot his eyes at me, but saw the smile on my face and relaxed. “Ha. Verra funny,” he said sarcastically, but I saw a hint of amusement in his eyes.

Putting a hand under his chin, I lifted his face towards me. I felt him stir under my touch and saw goosebumps rise on his body. “Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m not worried,” he said in a soft voice.

I put a hand on his strong shoulder, trying to look more confident about touching him than I actually was. Taking a step closer to him, I put the razor on his cheeks and slid down his cheek. I could feel eyes on me, never looking away as I worked, feeling my knees go weak. His skin was warm under my fingers, making me crave more of him. His breath was soft, making me bend closer to him without me noticing.

Once he was fully shaved, I put the razor on the table and let go of his shoulder. He cleared his throat and straightened up, looking away as I dipped a cloth in a small basin of hot water.

“Here,” I said, cupping his cheek with my hand as I wiped the rest of the soap off his face. His jaw was tensed and his breath hitched at the contact of the warm cloth on him. “And done,” I smiled proudly, putting the cloth on the table.

He ran a hand on his face and smiled shyly. “Well done. I think ye did it better than I do.” We didn’t speak, staying silent while looking at each other until I put a hand on his chest. He answered by covering my hand with his and bringing me closer to him. My fingers found his hair, running through the soft red curls. The space between us was considerably reduced and we were now breathing the same air.

I moved first, brushing my lips against his before kissing him. It was the first time that I kissed someone and I was happy it was Jamie. His lips were soft and warm, inviting me for more. He kissed me back, his hands on the curves of my hips. He deepened the kiss, running his tongue inside my mouth, making me part my lips to meet him halfway.

A moan escaped my mouth when he pressed me against his toned chest. I melted against him, my tongue swirling around with his. We kissed for a while until the need for air became urgent. Resting my forehead on his with my eyes closed, I breathed slowly, feeling the ghost of his lips on mine. “Claire…” he whispered.

I opened my eyes to see his ocean blue eyes turned black with lust. I framed his face with both my hands and kissed him again, more slowly this time. He moaned in my mouth before kissing my cheeks and traveling down to my chest. “I want ye Claire. I want ye so much I can scarcely breathe.” He grabbed a handful of curls, making me look at him. “Will ye have me?”

His nails were digging into the skin on my shoulders, making every hair on my body stand up. I kissed him back. “Yes. Yes, I’ll have you,” I breathed, and at that very moment his strong hands parted my legs and wrapped them around him in a swift move. He got up and carried me to his bed, gently laying me on my back. Kicking off his boots, he climbed on top of me and began leaving small kisses on the skin of my chest.
As much as I tried to surrender to the feeling, I couldn’t help but feel insecure. A part of me thought he had more experience than I did in this matter, and I didn’t want to disappoint him. He must have felt me tense up, for he quickly looked up at me, his eyes soft. “Are ye sure ye want this? We dinna have to…”

“It’s fine,” I smiled reassuringly.

“Ye ken I can read all on yer face? It’s fine if ye dinna want to talk about it, but if ye are not ready we can wait.”

“I want this,” I kissed him deeply, pulling him closer, his weight like a security blanket on top of me.

“But…” he said a moment later, his mouth parting from mine. “I feel like I’m forcing myself onto ye, I-“

“I just hope I’ll be good at it,” I blurted out, feeling my cheeks turn crimson red. “I… I want you to like it.”

He smiled softly and kissed the tip of my nose. “I will. If ye like it.”

“I just…” I looked away, feeling as if his slanted eyes were reading into my soul. “I’ve never done this before and…”


“I am, I thought you had.” I couldn’t help but smile, feeling a weight off my shoulders.

“No. I always wanted to wait until I get married.”

“Oh, well—” he interrupted me with a soft kiss on my lips. “Mmm…” I sighed, crossing my legs around his hips to bring him closer. I could feel him hard between my legs, which only made me want him more. He must have felt it as he deepened the kiss, moaning in my mouth and locking his hips with mine. “Jamie…” I sighed.

“Ye have too many clothes on,” he whispered against my lips and I felt his hands reach to my shift. He pushed it up over my hips and pulled it off before throwing it on the floor. He looked at me, his eyes trailing down my body, his cheeks turning redder as he did. The way he was looking at me only made my heart hammer faster in my chest.

“My turn,” I said and sat up, pushing him on his knees. I kissed the hair on his chest down to the soft skin on his abdomen and gently bit just under his navel as my hands traveled down him to unbutton his pants. He never looked away as I did, his breath hitching.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed his pants down and freed his erection. I swallowed, recalling the moment I had seen him at the river. He gently pushed me down on my back and clumsily took his breeks off.

He was laying on top of me, his skin burning against mine. I ran a hand in his curls, enjoying the proximity of our naked bodies. It was sensual and I felt at ease with him.

Jamie parted my legs with his knee and kissed the skin on my chest before giving his attention to one of my breasts. My nipple hardened under his tongue, his teeth gently biting the skin, eliciting a moan from me. He did the same to the other breast, making me arch my back for more of his touch. “Jamie…” I breathed and he looked up at me. “Touch me.” I took his hand and guided it
between my legs. We both let out a sigh when his hand covered me. He closed his eyes, his fingers hesitantly exploring this area of my body. When he slid a finger inside of me, my breath got stuck in my throat. Opening his wonder-filled eyes to look at my face, he slowly moved his finger. “It’s so… wet,” he whispered, the corner of his mouth curling up when a moan escaped my lips.

“Oh, God.” I closed my eyes, my entire body relaxing under his touch. He inserted another finger and continued making slow motions. I rocked my hips to meet him halfway. “Now,” I opened my eyes and ordered.

His fingers slipped out of me and he took his cock in his hand and guided it to me. Hiding my face in the crook of his neck, I closed my eyes when he entered me slowly. Biting my lower lip, I grabbed a handful of curls. He didn’t move for a moment before he moved out of me. “Is it—“

“Don’t stop,” I panted, putting a hand on his bum. He pushed inside of me again, this time a little faster. It wasn’t like I thought it would be. He started to roll his hips, moaning every time he pushed inside of me. After a few strokes, he froze, taking a deep breath before thrusting and spilling himself inside of me with a muffled groan.

We still, legs intertwined for a moment until he rolled off of me and fell on his back right beside me. He let out a deep breath and opened his eyes to look at me. “Did I hurt you?” he asked sometime later.

I shook my head. “No. I mean… no,” I corrected myself.

He frowned and turned on his side. “What? Tell me.”

Feeling my cheeks turn red, I turned on my side to face him. “A little bit. At first, but then it was alright.”

“So… ye liked it?” he asked, worried about the answer. Smiling, I put a hand on his cheeks and kissed him.

“It’s different for women. The first time is never really…” I shrugged, feeling slightly embarrassed. “It’s not because of you, it’s just the way it is.”

“Oh,” he frowned. Slowly, I saw his eyelids become heavy and he fell asleep, his breath soft and the corner of his mouth curled up.

I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of him. Naked, his hair standing on his head, and his cheeks pink. Closing my eyes, I could still feel his lips on mine and him inside of me. Slowly, I let myself fall asleep next to him.

***

When I woke up the next morning, the sun was shining on my face. My limbs felt numb and heavy after the previous night. Opening my eyes, I expected to see Jamie next to me, but he was gone. Even if I knew it was probably late and that he had a lot of work to do, I couldn’t help but feel rather disappointed. I was hoping we could repeat the events of last night a second time.

Sitting up, I ran a hand through the mess of curls on my head, yawning loudly. I noticed a sheet of paper on the bedside and, with a broad grin on my face, I bent to read it.

Good Morning Sassenach. Will you meet me for dinner tonight?

Rolling my eyes with a stupid smile on my face, I jumped out of bed and got ready before walking
downstairs, hoping there was still going to be some breakfast left.

I spent the day humming joyful melodies, smiling like an idiot for no reason, feeling butterflies in my stomach at the thought of Jamie and more time with him tonight.

When I entered my surgery, chanting words of The Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy, a song my father used to sing to me, I was surprised to see Malva. “Jesus H. Christ, you scared me,” I smiled.

“I’m sorry.”

She was mixing herbs like I had shown her how to a few days after she started working with me. She had told me her father and brother didn’t like that she spent so much time with me. Her father wanted her to spend more time reading and studying the books he told her to read. As soon as she was done, though, she ran to be with me. She was very smart and pretty. She wasn’t aware of it, but most of the lads turned their heads when she walked down a hallway.

“Ye seem to be in a good mood,” she said, the corners of her mouth slowly curling up.

Shrugging, I pretended it was nothing while I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, run along the hills around the castle, and sing and dance to my heart’s content. “It’s a beautiful day, that’s all.” Or a beautiful night, I thought, blushing.

“I’ve never seen ye look so… relaxed.”

“Thank you,” I said, teasingly, “I didn’t think I was that severe.”

“You’re not.” She put her hair behind her ear. She had long, straight black hair, like a witch.

Running footsteps came from the hallway and the door opened with a loud bang. We both looked up to see Fergus out of breath. “It’s Mister Fraser. He’s been injured. He needs assistance right now.”

I felt my heart stop in my chest.

Jamie.

I grabbed the small medical box in which I put all my tools and went with him, Malva behind me.

Following Fergus to the stables, my vision blurred as thoughts of what kind of accident could have happened to Jamie came to my mind. My heart heavy in my chest, I ran, hoping we wouldn’t be too late.

As we approached the stables, my feet became heavy and I felt my throat tighten. “Where is he?” I asked Fergus.

On cue, Jamie emerged from the stables, standing normally, nothing showing he could be in any sort of distress. “What happened?” I asked him, breathless.

“‘Tis my hand, it hurts a bit,” he said with a smile.

Blinking, I looked at him, my brain trying to assimilate the information. “Your hand? But… I thought it was urgent.”

“Well… it is. I couldn’t wait to see ye until tonight,” he smirked, putting a hand on my waist.

“But…” I said as he pulled me closer to him. Looking behind my shoulder, I saw Malva looking at
us, her cheeks pink with the effort, and Fergus with a smile on his face. “Fergus… I thought…”

“Well, I asked him to tell ye to come. It’s not my fault if he’s French… a little dramatic, ye ken,” he bent to kiss me, but I hit him on the arm. “Oow!” He cried, taking a step back.

“You scared me, Jamie! I thought something bad had happened!” I said in a disapproving voice.

He raised his eyebrows, playfully looking at me with a smirk on his face. He was terribly handsome, making me want to both kiss him and slap his face. “Ye were worried about me?”

“Of course! I’m a healer, that’s what I do.”

Looking past my shoulder, he nodded at Malva. “Thank ye for coming, but everything is fine now. Ye can go back to the castle. Fergus, ye have some work to do while Madam the healer helps me wi’ my hand.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle as he took me to the wooden bench where I had first healed him. We sat and I took his hand in mine, slowly massaging his fingers. I could feel his eyes on me, making me blush. “Does your hand really hurt at least?” I asked, shaking my head.

“‘Tis a bit sore, aye.”

Rolling up my eyes, I finally met his eyes. “‘Tis a bit sore,” I said, mocking his accent.

He laughed. “Aye, but I ken it will be better wi’ yer help. I couldna concentrate on my work, ye ken.” His voice was playful.

“Because of the hand?” I asked, shooting my eyebrows up.

He smirked, his beautiful blue eyes looking fondly at me, the sun shining on his red hair. “Aye,” he said in a voice so low I almost didn’t hear it.

Relieved that he was fine, and finally breathing normally again, I was happy to see him. Happy and excited, wanting nothing more than to kiss him, run my fingers through his soft curls, and lie with him.

We looked at each other without saying anything while I made slow circle motions on his hand. After a moment, he had to get back to work. We got up, saying goodbye. I was just turning around when he grabbed my arm and pulled me towards him for a kiss. It was short, but it nevertheless made me feel like I had been struck by a bolt of lightning. He opened his eyes and looked at me with a shy smile, his cheeks turning pink. “See you tonight.”
"Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night"

We barely made it to the bedroom. After stopping in the hall for dinner, eating just enough to survive a few hours without food, we excuse ourselves and walked out of the hall as soon as possible.

We ran to Jamie’s room, hand in hand, chuckling to each other and saying things in a low voice. When we entered his room, he pushed me against the door and kissed me deeply. My arms around his neck, I locked my hips with his, my tongue swiping around the inside of his mouth. He trailed his lips down my neck, biting the sensitive skin before licking his way to my breasts. I sighed, running my hand through his hair as he kissed me. After a moment, he looked at me, breathless. “Today was the longest day o’ my life,” he said with a sheepish smile.

I kissed him hard as his arms held me tight against him. He walked us to his bed, falling on top of me. We both tried to remove the layers of clothes that were separating us, but had little success. I couldn’t help but laugh. “Wait, let me,” I said.

He pulled back and lifted his kilt as I did the same with my dress. He parted my legs with his strong hands and I locked them around his waist. “Are ye ready or do I have to—”

“Do it,” I said, kissing him deeply, surprising him by taking hold of his cock. He moaned, burying his face in the crook of my neck as I guided him into me. He slowly entered me before freezing for a moment. It was only the second time we were doing it, but it was as if I’d known his body my entire life. He pulled back, looking up at me. I nodded and he thrust one more time, deeper this time. He never looked away until his body shook and he collapsed on top of me. He didn’t move, breathing deeply, his breath tickling the skin of my neck.

He finally rolled onto his back, looking at me with a smile before glancing up at the ceiling in silence. “Do ye think we get used to it?” he asked, a moment later.

“To what?”

“This amazing feeling,” he smiled, his cheeks turning pink. “I mean… after, when...”

“I hope not.”

It was his turn to turn on his side and face me. “Did ye like it?”

“Yes,” I said in a breath, “I did like it.”

Nodding, he turned on his back and let out a breath. “I want ye to like it as much as I do,” he said, his blushing deepening.

I kissed him, rolling on top of him, locking my hips with his. Licking my bottom lip, he let out a small moan. “Sassenach… ye have too many clothes on.”
“So do you,” I bit his lip, making him smile against my mouth. We kissed for a while, hands exploring each other’s bodies. He helped me take off some layers, his lips never parting from mine unless oxygen was needed. At some point, I felt him hard against me. “Already? I am impressed Mister Fraser,” I smiled.

“What can I do when I have a beautiful lass on top of me?”

Blushing, I kissed him and lifted his kilt out of the way. I touched him, making his cock twitch, and slowly stroked him, looking at his face to see if I was doing the right thing. His hands were holding my waist so tightly, I thought he was going to leave marks. He threw his head back and shut his eyes. “A Dia,” he moaned.

“Is that alright?” I asked, afraid I was doing something wrong.

“Yes!” he said and opened his eyes. “I want to be inside of ye,” he whispered, sitting up to kiss me. Lifting my shift out of the way, I aligned my hips with his cock and sat down on him, a soft moan escaping our lips. Slowly, I started to move my hips against him, my hand gripping a handful of his curls.

He pushed the shift off my shoulders and kissed my breasts one by one. I gripped the bottom of his shirt and pulled it over his head, throwing it on the floor, my breasts brushing against his chest. He kissed my neck, pulling my head backwards for better access. I bit my lip, feeling spasms run through my body, and cried out a noise I didn’t even know I could make. Jamie followed me and I opened up my eyes to see him look at me as if I was some kind of specimen. “I didna know women could…” he grinned. “Does it happen every time?” he asked, but I shut him up, kissing him deeply, pressing my lips against him, pushing him on his back.

“No,” I answered in a breath, “but I count on you to make it happen again,” I said as my cheeks blushed. He lifted his head to kiss me gently. I rolled onto my side of the second time of the night.

“That was great,” he said.

“Yes,” I whispered, and we slowly drifted off to sleep.

I woke up a few hours later, feeling slightly confused. Blinking, I realized that it was completely dark outside, and only a fire in the chimney was lighting up the room. Sitting up, I saw Jamie at the table near the fire, eating from a plate of cheese. He was completely naked, his fiery red hair standing on his head. A smile lit up my face before I realized it. Looking up, he saw me and smiled back. “Ye’re awake. ‘Tis pretty exhausting activity, is it not?”

Chuckling, I put a plaid around my shoulders and walked to him. Standing by his side, I bent and kissed him deeply. He grabbed one of my legs and caressed the back of my thigh. “Mmmm… I didna think I was still hungry after all this cheese, but now…” he said with a smirk.

Sitting next to him, I let him feed me cheese, laughing. “Whisky?” he asked, and I nodded. He poured the gold coloured liquid in a glass and handed it to me.

“Thank you,” I smiled and took a sip before eating from the plate he had brought from the kitchen. Looking up, I saw that he was looking at me with soft eyes, making my cheeks turn pink. “What?” I asked, my mouth full.

“Ye’re beautiful.”

Smiling shyly, I buried my face in my glass. He looked away, an awkward silence between the two of us. My heart was hammering in my chest. I had never felt so alive before. “Thank you,” I said.
His eyes met mine and he smiled. Putting a hand behind his neck, I pulled him closer to me and kissed him softly. I didn’t tell him, but I was falling in love with him. I was falling so hard, it made me feel dizzy. “You are, too.”

***

It went on like this for a few days. I often visited Jamie at the stables and he came to see me at the surgery when he could. We almost never ate in the hall, taking supplies from the kitchen before running to his room, where we spent the evening in bed. When we found the time, we liked to walk around the castle, sit by the stream and talk, or simply lay down with each other and make out. After spending so much time together, we started to know each other better; and the more I learned about Jamie, the more I loved him.

He told me about his parents, about his home. He grew up on a farm on the Fraser lands. His home, a castle named Lallybroch, was built by his father a few years before Jamie was born. He grew up with his sister Jenny and his brother Willie. They both lived in America now, in North Carolina. Ian, Jenny’s husband and Jamie’s best friend, had lost his leg during his childhood. He worked in a printshop while Jenny raised three beautiful children. She was five years older than him, she was small while he was tall, she had dark brown hair while his was red, and her eyes were brown like their father’s while Jamie had his mother’s light coloured eyes. Jamie talked a lot about his sister with love and admiration. On the other hand, Jamie didn’t know much about his brother. He had moved to the colonies while Jamie was still young. He often wrote to his parents, saying he was married and now was the father of three young healthy boys — but after their death, Willie had stopped writing.

The more we talked about his family, the more I felt he was slowly starting make peace with the horrible things that had happened to his parents. I told him it was not worth getting angry at the soldiers who killed them, it would not make them come back.

He asked me about my parents, about our life in England. I was only eight when I moved with the Grants, so my memories of my parents were a bit blurred. Every time we talked about it, I was tempted to tell him the truth. The truth my uncle had told me when he had thought I was old enough to understand. He, my mother, and my father were not from the 18th century. My mother was born in Oxford in 1893 and my father in 1891. It was my uncle who had told them about the circle of standing stones at Craigh na Dun. They all were interested in history; my mother had grown up in a family of historians while my father was a professor at Oxford, and Uncle Lamb was an archeologist. The past was always something alluring to them, especially when the Great War began. They traveled through the stones and never looked back.

I terribly wanted to tell Jamie, but how could he understand? Even I, who had spent my life with people from the future, couldn’t understand everything that it meant. So how would a born-and-bred Highlander not see this as an act of witchcraft and make me burn as a witch? Therefore, I didn’t say anything and instead decided to wait for the right time. But there was never a right time to say such a thing.

One Sunday afternoon, I was in my surgery ordering herbs. Malva was gone to read and study the books her father had told her to. I liked having her around, but I also liked to be alone sometimes. Now that I spent all my nights with Jamie and she was here all day long, I had no more time left to be alone.

I worked for a few hours until my shoulders grew tense. My head was pounding and I terribly wanted to finish and go outside. At this moment, Jamie arrived, as if he had heard my thoughts. “Ye’ve been working for a while,” he said, standing against the frame of the door.
“I want to finish this.”

“Why?” he asked, walking down the three steps to the surgery. “Are ye leaving tomorrow? Or the day after? Ye can finish that tomorrow,” he said, putting his warm hands on my shoulders and gently massaging the sore muscles. With a sigh, I let my head fall against his stomach, closing my eyes.

“Mmm.. That’s good,” I said in a whisper.

“I told ye ye need to stop. We wouldna want ye to hurt those pretty shoulders of yers.” He planted a small kiss in the crook of my neck, making me smile.

“I can stop if you have something better to offer.”

“Actually, I do,” he bent to whisper in my ear, making the hair on my neck stand up. “There’s a beautiful sun outside. How about we take a walk by the stream?”

I looked up at him and nodded. “I like this idea.”

We walked hand in hand by the stream until we arrived at our favourite spot where we could lie down and sunbathe.

He sat next to me, still holding my hand and kissed my knuckles. I chuckled, feeling butterflies in my belly every time he touched me.

Jamie looked up at me, his eyes serious but tender. “There’s something I want to give ye. Something I should’ve given ye long before.” He opened his sporran and took out a silver ring. “Ye’re no’ my wife if ye dinna have a ring,” he looked up at me, smiling shyly and sliding it on my finger. It fit perfectly.

“It’s beautiful.”

“When I married ye, I didna have anything. No ring and no money to buy one. I still don’t have money, but this… this is the only thing I have that belongs to me. ‘Tis the only thing that is really from me.” I looked up at him, frowning. “It’s made from my key. The key to Lallybroch.” His eyes were veiled with tears, but he was smiling. So was I.

“Jamie… It’s perfect. Thank you so much,” I said, framing his face with my hands and kissing him. “I love it.”

He put his hand on mine and looked deep into my eyes. “I love ye, Sassenach.”

I kissed him again. “I love you too.”

He smiled. “Can we say we are marrit now? We have consummated the wedding, that’s for sure,” he teased, making me blush. “And now ye have a ring.”

“And I have you.”

***

My love for Jamie grew every day. That day by the stream when we really talked for the first time — it felt like moons ago, while in reality it was only weeks — was the day we planted a seed that had grown into a beautiful flower. I had never thought I could be so happy, especially during the days riding on a horseback from the lands of the clan Grant to Castle Leoch, when I thought
everything was over. Finally, it was just the beginning.

My room was leagued to someone else and I started sharing Jamie’s bedroom. Even if he knew he couldn’t forgive his uncle for betraying his father — at least not for now — Jamie didn’t hold any anger against him anymore. Things were finally becoming normal. I still hadn’t discovered whether someone had really tried to poison me. I had my doubts and was very careful, but I hadn’t been ill again. Maybe, after all, it was just food poisoning or simply fatigue after the stressful days following my arrival at Castle Leoch.

One afternoon, I was walking in the castle when I heard shouting from the hall. Walking towards the voices, I finally saw a small group of men standing in a circle. I recognized Dougal MacKenzie, the brother of the Laird and the other uncle of Jamie, Tom and Allan Christie, Malva’s father and brother, along with a few other Highlanders, including Jamie and Malva themselves.

Apparently, Allan and Tom were very angry and Malva’s face was blank. “What’s happening?” I asked.

“Did ye know about all of this?” Allan Christie walked towards me, threatening. Jamie stopped him, pushing him away.

“What’s going on?”

“The lass is pregnant,” Dougal said. “We’re trying to know who the father is. We need to marry the lass as soon as possible, but she doesn’t want to tell the name.”

I looked at Malva, not believing what they were saying. Malva pregnant? Impossible. She would have told me. She wasn’t really the talkative kind, but we told each other things. Until I told her about it, she didn’t even know exactly what sex was and how to do it. But as I studied her, I could see it. I had seen my mother help women give birth when I was younger. Her face had changed and her breasts were bigger. She really was pregnant.

“I can’t marry the man,” she said. Her voice sounded unusually estranged and her grey eyes were cold as ice. “He’s already married.”

“Then we’ll find another man,” Dougal said.

“Already married?” Allan exclaimed. He was the one doing all the talking while Tom was now starring in front of him, white like a ghost. “Who the bloody hell is it?”

“It’s him. Jamie Fraser,” she said, lifting her small hand to point at my husband.
I didn’t remember running out of the castle, but I found myself sitting by the stream, my heart hammering in my chest.

The moment Malva pointed at Jamie, identifying him as the father of the child she was carrying, kept repeating itself in my head.

I was glad Jamie hadn’t come running after me. All I wanted was to be left alone with my thoughts.

I couldn’t possibly believe it. It was impossible. Malva was such an innocent girl — just the thought that she had slept with someone was surprising, considering her lack of maturity. But the thought that she had slept with Jamie, my husband, while she knew he and I were bonding, was beyond conceivable.

Yet, I kept thinking about what she had said and worry started to creep into my mind.

“It’s him. Jamie Fraser,” she said, lifting her small hand to point at my husband. I was happy to be looking at Jamie when she said it. His face went from polite perplexity to wild outrage. “He’s the father of my child.”

Allan Christie jumped on Jamie, but was stopped by Murtagh and Dougal. “Bastard!” he screamed.

But Jamie didn’t listen to the comments made by Malva’s brother. He only stood still, watching her with anger in his eyes. “Have ye gone mad, woman?” he asked. He opened his mouth to continue speaking, but his words were caught in his throat in disbelief.

“It was him. When Claire was sick, I came to his room one night. I knew he was sad and I was too, to see my friend like that. It just happened.”

Allan was boiling, his face red and steam blowing from his ears. “Whore!” he screamed at his sister.

Everything was so blurry, I almost didn’t hear what they were saying. It was like the world had stopped for a moment and everything was going in slow motion.

Hours later, I was still sitting by the stream, thinking about everything that had happened. I couldn’t believe Jamie would do this to me. It was true that it could be easy to believe he’d sleep with a young girl like Malva the first time I saw him, when he was an arrogant bastard and I thought he didn’t respect anyone, especially not women. But ever since I got to know him, I discovered that Jamie was the most respectable man. Even if he had wanted to sleep with her — and just the thought of it made me want to throw up — he wouldn’t have done it as long as we were married. Also, he loved me. Maybe it was bold or naive of me to believe that given the circumstances, but I could feel it in every fiber of my body when he looked at me or touched me. If Jamie really loved me, he wouldn’t do this.
That would mean Malva was a lying bitch. Why would she lie about such a thing, knowing it would hurt me? We were supposed to be friends. I had shared so many things with her, from my medical knowledge to my deepest secrets — secrets I had told to no one before. Could she really betray me like this?

The image of her standing in the hall came back to my mind. Her long, black hair hid behind a cap. She wasn’t wearing one earlier. Her piercing grey eyes followed me whenever she watched me heal people. Could she have been the one who had poisoned me?

Questions came into my mind, but I had no answers. I was convinced that Jamie had nothing to do with this, but I needed to know why.

“Sassenach?” I heard his voice say at the same moment. “Do ye mind if I sit with you?”

“No.” My voice was hoarse and felt strange, as if it belonged to someone else.

He sat with a sigh and stayed a moment in silence, looking at the water flowing dangerously in the stream. I couldn’t look up at him, knowing that if I did, I would probably break down and cry. Things were just starting to work between the two of us, and of course something had to cause trouble again.

“I dinna ken how worthy my words are… but Claire, she is lying.”

“I know,” I whispered, finally looking up at him. His eyes were troubled and his face was as tense as it was when I first met him.

He sighed, reassured to hear this. “I ken she is your friend… and I was not the kindest when I first met ye, but I would never, never do something like that to ye.” He took my hands tightly, looking deep into my eyes.

“You’re right that you were an ass when I first met you, but I know you’ve changed. Also, there’s something I never told you…”

He frowned. “What is it?”

Taking a deep breath, I tried to find a way to tell him. There would always be the possibility that perhaps I’d just been sick, but if Malva was capable of accusing Jamie of being the father of her child, she could most definitely have tried to poison me. Maybe she didn’t want me to die — after all, she didn’t know much about plants at the time. Maybe she just wanted me to be sick so I wouldn’t be away with Jamie for a long time.

“You remember when Colum sent us away and I was sick?”

“Of course. I was scairt to death, I don’t think I could ever forget that. Why are you thinking about this?”

My heart was hammering in my chest. What I was going to say to Jamie was quite dangerous for Malva. She could be punished for trying to kill me, and even if I hated her at the moment, I didn’t want harm to come upon her.

“I thought… I mean, the idea came to my mind that perhaps someone had tried to poison me.”

He didn’t say anything, instead thinking about the words I just said. “You think Malva did this?”

“I never thought it was her who did it before today, but now…”
He started to breathe heavily, his cheeks turning red in anger. “The wee lying bitch!” he said. “If I see her, I’ll—” he shook his head. “I canna believe her, Claire. After everything ye did for her? Why do ye think someone tried to poison you? I dinna doubt yer knowledge and everything, but what made ye think ye weren’t only sick?”

I shrugged, feeling suddenly ridiculous. “It’s just… see, I’m rarely sick… and even if my arrival at the castle was quite stressful, I was feeling much more peaceful during our trip than the previous days of my stay. The symptoms I experienced are all symptoms of poisoning. I also had hallucinations during the time I was sick. I had the impression my mother was sitting right next to me, and she was so real I almost could touch her.”

He nodded. “I believe ye, Sassenach. And ye dinna think someone else in the castle could have done it?”

“Well, to be honest, I had trouble with no one, unless someone didn’t like me and I wasn’t aware of it. Or maybe someone attracted to you that could be jealous of our marriage. Do you have a crazy ex-girlfriend?” I asked with dark humour, but my heart stopped when I saw Jamie froze. “What?”

“Weel….” he blushed, “she wasna really a crazy ex girlfriend, like ye say, but….”

“What?” My heart was beating fast in my chest and my vision was blurring. It was a good thing that I was sitting on the ground, because if I had been standing, I probably would have fainted. Had Jamie kept something hidden from me?

“There’s a lass… it was never serious between the two of us… but I kissed her, once.” He looked down at his feet, shameful. “It was before ye arrived. I ken I shouldna have done it, but… I didna care at the time.’’

“Who is she?”

“Her name is Laoghaire,’” he said. The name did ring a bell, but I couldn’t put a face to it. “She is short with blonde hair…”

“Oh,” I said, remembering the little girl coming to ask me for a love potion a few weeks ago. I had no clue it had been for Jamie. The more I started to think about it, the more I believed that perhaps I should’ve paid attention to what was going on in the castle. “And you think she could have poisoned me because we got married?”

“Well… she’s… something.”

“And you kissed her? Even if she’s crazy?”

“Well she wasna crazy at the time… I discovered that when you arrived to the castle.’’

“Oh, God,” I sighed, rubbing my forehead with my fingers. “What the hell is going on? Can’t we have a break for a moment?” Lying my head on his shoulder, I closed my eyes. I just wanted to go away. Just as I started to love being at Leoch, I realized that this place would never be my home. I was afraid we’d have to leave one day and that that day was terribly close. “We’ll have to go back at some point. What are we going to tell them?’’

“I don’t know, but we didna have to go now.’’

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Nobody asked me anything. I didn’t see Malva nor her father or brother for supper. I didn’t stay
long, only grabbing some food before going back to my room. I didn’t want to be seen and I didn’t want to hear what people had to say. I knew Colum had probably tried to bury the rumors, but things like this were always known by the people, especially here in this time. People had nothing else to do, other than gossip.

Jamie didn’t find the idea of eating downstairs any more attractive than I did. We ate in silence, not saying anything. I wasn’t mad at him and he was very understanding, but there was an awkwardness between the two of us. The intimacy we shared only hours ago wasn’t present and it was maybe a good thing, allowing us to think properly.

It went on for a few days, and it grew worse with each passing day. Everything was a nightmare. The way people looked at us, the way people treated Jamie, and the heavy atmosphere in the castle all felt suffocating. Every day, I hated Malva even more.

Even with everything going on, I still needed to go to my surgery. That morning, I decided it could wait a little bit longer. I stayed in bed, feeling my heart heavy in my chest, and I started to weep, once again wishing my mother was there.

After a moment, I finally decided to get ready and go to the surgery. My steps were heavy and as I walked in the hallway leading to my dungeon, I felt my heart sink, wishing I was away from Leoch with Jamie and not in this prison.

As soon as I opened the door, I knew something was wrong. My surgery had always been a place where people never felt at ease. Nobody had died while I was the one in charge, but someone probably had before my time, and it always felt as if their ghost was haunting the room. However, it was different now. There was a dreadful feeling, making the hair on my arms stand up. I knew something was wrong before I saw Malva’s dead body on the ground.

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There’s something about Scottish people that makes them ready to see anybody burn as a witch. They can say how deep their love for God is and how they want to be good Christians, but before all of that, they believe in their oldest traditions and such things as fairies and witches.

Witches live among them – they look beautiful and are very smart. They have a certain knowledge about herbs and medicine, and most of the time they are very different from other girls. Witches are evil, and they are a temptation to men and will do anything to catch them in their spider webs. Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.

Even if burning witches was illegal, they didn’t care about rules when they had the most amazing, weird, and special woman in front of them. These people probably had never left Leoch before, and the best time of their life was just starting.

A witch, an affair, and now a murder.

We all die of something, but I had to admit that burning as a witch was the last thing that I would have thought of. Die in childbirth, die of smallpox or any other disease, or die of hunger. These were the ways people died in that time. Not by burning. At least, not as often.

I was in a hole in the ground — the thief hole, they called it. It was dark and cold and I was alone. Jamie had no clue I was there, as he’d been sent away with Murtagh to take some time. He probably didn’t know that Colum just didn’t want him to be there when they eventually burned me.

My trial was tomorrow. I didn’t know how exactly they were going to prove I had not only killed
Malva, but how I had also taken her soul from God and used my magic to enchant her. Yet, I knew in my heart it wasn't going to be hard to convince them. If the people of Cranesmuir wanted blood, they were going to get blood. Or ashes.

I wanted to laugh as much as I wanted to cry. This was the most absurd situation. How the hell did I ended up here? I didn’t want to die alone, especially now that I had something to lose.

Jamie. It couldn’t end this way between the two of us. We were just starting to bond, I was just starting to love him. It was unfair that our story was going to end before it even started.

It broke my heart to think that he would come back and learn that I was dead. No goodbye, no burials — like nothing had happened. Already forgotten. My life would be useless and nobody would remember me. They would make Jamie marry someone else, perhaps that Leery girl, and he would forget about me with time.

My hands were shaking because of the cold and the nervousness that was swallowing me alive. I knew I’d been in this hole for at least six hours by looking at the position of the sun in the sky, but I didn't know how much time I still had to live.

At some point, when it was starting to get dark outside, I decided to lie down. There was no way I could fall asleep. I was too nervous and too hungry for that, but I still was exhausted and I couldn't hold my body up any longer. The energy was drained from my body, and at this moment, I wished they had already killed me instead of making me fear my upcoming death.

If it'd been around six hours since I was here, Jamie was probably already far away from Leoch. I didn't exactly know where Colum had sent him to “spend some time away”, but it was certainly not in the closest village. Wherever he was, nobody was coming for me.

Desperate, I finally managed to fall asleep. It was a troubled sleep, with nightmares haunting me. My body was sweaty but shaking in the cold of the night. The sound of a voice calling after me roused me. At first, I thought it was in my dream, but as I slowly started to wake up, I realized it was coming from above me. “Madame Fraser?” the soft voice asked with a French accent. “Madame Fraser, are you in there?”

Blinking, I looked up at the trap door, but couldn't see anything. I stood up and climbed on a rock to get closer to it. “Fergus?” I wasn't sure if he was really there or if my mind was playing tricks to me. “Fergus, is that you?” I grabbed the grid with a shaky hand and felt his warm little fingers on mine.

“Aye, Jamie has sent me to get you.”

Jamie.

I felt a wave of relief wash over me and my eyes watered at the hope of getting out of this bloody hole. “I stole the key,” he whispered, and I was finally starting to see the shadow of his curly hair in the night. “We have to be careful and not make any sound if we do not want to get caught.”

“Okay,” I said, and he unlocked the door of the trap without a sound. He helped me out of the hole and as soon as my feet landed on the ground, I took a deep breath for the first time in while.

“Let’s not stay here. Follow me,” he said, taking my hand and running in the dark. I had no idea where we were going and how Fergus could know the way, but still I followed him. He was my only chance at living.

After running for a while, we stopped. I was breathless, my heart hammering in my chest, tight
because of the corset. He whistled and a man came out of the shadow. I immediately recognized Murtagh. “Alright, lass.” It was the first time he was talking to me since we traveled together when I arrived at Leoch. “Climb on the horse,” he whispered. I obeyed and he helped Fergus on the horse behind me. “I’ll meet ye there,” he told the boy and slapped the horse on the butt.

We rode for a while. This way back to Jamie was long, and even if I was happy to be out of the hole, I wanted to be far away from this place. Tears were streaming down my face during the voyage until I saw the shadow of him and his horse, standing tall on the hill in front of us.

I jumped off the horse and ran to him. Falling into his arms, I began weeping again. “It’s alright, mo chridhe. Yer safe now,” he whispered, patting my hair. I could hear in his voice that he was as relieved as I was.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“It was the maid. She sent Fergus to warn me as soon as they came to get ye. I’m sae sorry I left, but my uncle said I was going to meet you at the village. I didna ken he was planning on arresting ye and…” his voice trailed off and he tightened his embrace. “Come now, we have to go. A few hours on horseback, do ye think you can do it?”

I nodded, whipping my eyes. “Yes,” I said, my voice shaky. Whatever it took just to leave.

“Alright,” he said, kissing my forehead. “Let’s go.”

He helped me climb on his horse and sat behind me. “Lay yer head on my chest if ye need to sleep. Here, yer shivering,” he said, wrapping his plaid around my shoulders. I did as he told me to and laid my head on him, closing my eyes. His warmth was welcomed, as was the feeling of his strong arms around me.

We rode for hours. I spent the travel time falling asleep and suddenly waking up a few times, but everytime he felt me stir, Jamie reassured me.

I was awake when we arrived in Inverness. The town was deserted, but I could hear voices and music from inside the taverns. Jamie jumped off the horse and help me get down. He tied it and walked in one of the taverns, his hand in mine.

We rented a room we shared with Fergus. As soon as we arrived, Jamie started a fire and the boy laid down in front of the fireplace, immediately falling asleep. Jamie sat on the bed, kicking off his boots and lying down with a grunt. I stayed standing, looking around the room, still shaking after the events of the day. “Come, Claire,” he said softly, looking up at me.

I went to sit next to him, slowly taking off a few layers of my dress. He sat up and looked at me, his eyes filled with worry. “I’m so sorry this happened, Claire. I’m sorry about everything. If you hadna married me, ye wouldna have lived through all of this.”

“Jamie,” I said, putting a hand on his. “I’ve done many things in my life that I’m happy about, but marrying you was the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

He smiled, kissing my cheek. We stayed a moment in silence, simply enjoying being reunited.

“Claire… there’s a reason why I brought you to Inverness.”

I looked up at him and swallowed. “Why?”

“We cannot stay here any longer. If my uncle’s men are not looking for us, it’ll be the Red Coats.
Scotland is not safe. We willna be able to live freely here. I… you remember my sister, Jenny? She lives in the colonies with her husband. Maybe we could go there, buy land, and start a new life with them. We’d have a safe home and a family. What do you say?”

It was a lot to take, especially after the last few days. I wanted to say yes, I wanted to go with Jamie to America and start again. But it wasn’t a decision to take lightly. If we went, we’d probably never be able to come back. “I…”

“Whatever we decide, we canna stay here. We could go to France or England, but…”

I could see in his eyes that he wanted to go to America, that he wanted to see his sister again.

“Allright,” I smiled, “yes, I want to go.”

A broad smile lit up his face. “Murtagh and Fergus would come with us. We wouldna be alone.”

I smiled back, running a hand on his cheek.

“A new beginning,” I said and kissed him.
After spending three months on a ship to Boston, and a few weeks on another ship from Boston to Wilmington, I almost cried of happiness when we finally disembarked. Jamie took me in his arms, a tired smile on his face. If the travel had been hard for me, I couldn’t imagine what it’d been like for him.

He was seasick, and the mere act of setting foot on a deck made him want to throw up. During the first few days, he was so sick that I was scared he was going to die. He might have, if it hadn’t been for a man called Yi Tien Cho. He was a Chinese man working on the boat and as soon as he heard about Jamie’s condition, he started sticking needles on his face — and suddenly, my husband was in a much better condition. After that, the voyage was far less scary and much more enjoyable for the four of us, even if all we wanted was to see the land again.

Jamie knew the captain of this ship. He was working for his cousin Jared, who Jamie had met a few times. That connection allowed us to share a room and eat more than we would on any other ship. This ship was carrying things — I didn’t know exactly what — but not immigrants. Therefore, we had fewer chances of encountering potential illnesses, and the boat as a whole was more sanitary. At least, these were the positive sides the healer in me saw in that trip.

“Welcome home,” Jamie told me, kissing my cheek.

It was too soon to call it home, but it was a blessing to just be walking on a muddy ground.

“Does your sister know we are coming?” I asked him.

“I sent a letter to her when we were in Boston, but I dinna ken if she already received it. But we’ll soon find out,” he chuckled nervously. I could feel him getting all excited, his tired eyes shining with joy at the idea of seeing his sister for the first time in years. Also, I knew he hoped he would see his brother, but he didn’t know where he lived. There was a possibility that he didn’t live in the colonies anymore.

Ian Murray worked in a print shop named Ian Murray and Son, and Jamie asked a young boy on the road if he knew where this shop was. His excitement grew stronger when the boy said we were just a few blocks from there.

Fergus and Murtagh decided to wait for us in a tavern where we were going to spend the next few nights until we decided what we were going to do. Two key options laid before us: buy land, or buy a place in the city?

Jamie let out a breath of nervousness when we stopped in front of the print shop. I put a hand on his arm, smiling reassuringly. “He will be happy to see you.”

He smiled back, putting a hand on mine. “Aye. And he will be verra pleased to meet you, Sassenach,” Jamie said before kissing me loudly on the mouth, making me smile.

I let him enter the shop first, following from behind. We were greeted by a young boy with blond hair and big blue eyes. “Can I help ye, Sir?”

Jamie blinked, staring at the boy with an amazed look on his face. “Are ye…” he moved his mouth, but no word came out. The boy frowned. “Are you—”

“Jamie.” We both looked up to see who I assumed was Ian Murray staring, confused and
astonished. “Is it really you?”

“Who is this, Daddy?” the boy asked.

Ian walked to his son, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Ian,” Jamie said, his voice hoarse. “Aye, ‘tis me.”

He embraced Jamie, holding him tightly for a moment. I couldn’t help but smile. After the difficult past few months Jamie and I had been through, it felt good to dwell in a moment of pure happiness.

“Jenny will be so happy to see you!” he exclaimed, wiping a tear. He smiled and seemed to notice me for the first time. Jamie looked over his shoulder at me and his smile widened. He took my hand and introduced me.

“This is Claire Fraser, my wife,” he said proudly. “Claire, this is Ian. Jenny’s husband.”

I was expecting him to take my hand or kiss it, so I was surprised when he took me in his arms. “Enchanted. Welcome to the family.” He pulled back to smile at me before letting go of me and looking down at his son. “This is my son, Young Ian. Ian, this is your Uncle Jamie.”

“Young Ian.” Jamie smiled at the boy’s father before kneeling down in front of the boy, whose eyes went wild when he heard his name. Uncle Jamie was probably famous in the Murray house. “Enchanted,” he said, bowing his head.

“Pleased to meet you,” Young Ian said shyly.

“I have two other bairns waiting at home,” Ian said proudly. “Maggie and… well, Young Jamie.”

“I canna wait to meet them.”

Ian looked down at his son and whispered in his ear before telling us he was going to close the shop earlier today. “Jenny doesna like unexpected visitors, but I think it willna count if it’s you.”

We followed Ian and his son out of the shop and left for the Murray’s. It was raining outside, but it didn’t stop Jamie and his friend from walking at a leisurely pace and talking about the printing business. I was happy to see Jamie like this, and I was also relieved that we easily found them. However, as we made our way to his sister, I was growing more nervous.

I had thought about it during our trip to America, but at that time, the idea of meeting Jamie’s sister was such an abstract idea that even if I felt confident, the reality of it was too far away for me to wrap my head around what it meant. But now that we were on our way to meet her, I started to doubt myself.

The only family I ever had were my parents and my uncle. Families were not something I was used to. I knew it was the same for Jamie — it had been years since the last time he’d seen his family and I knew that Leoch was never a home for him, but Jenny was still his sister.

The Murrays were my only chance at having a family again — something I always dreamed of having. If they didn’t love me, I didn’t know if a life here with them would be possible.

Jamie put his arm around my shoulder while he was speaking with Ian. He must have felt me tense up and somehow, his awareness reassured me. He knew his sister better than I did. If he had wanted us to come here to see her, it was because she’d be happy to meet me.
The Murrays lived on the second floor of an apothecary store. I thought it must be a good sign. Their little apartment was warm and welcoming when we stepped inside. “Jenny,” Ian walked in, a big smile on his face. We followed him into the small living room.

“In the kitchen!” A Scottish voice called from the back of the apartment.

“Daddy!” A young girl came running in to hug her father.

“Maggie!” he exclaimed, taking her in his arms.

“Who is that, Daddy?” she asked, looking over Ian’s shoulder at Jamie and me. Ian winked at her and put a finger on his mouth. “Jenny, I brought visitors.”

A small woman walked out the kitchen, flour widespread all over her apron. At first, her face was serious, but when she laid eyes on Jamie, her mouth fell open and her eyes went wide.

“Hi, Jenny,” Jamie smiled.

“What the devil are ye doing here?” she asked, blinking.

“They’ve come to move to North Carolina,” Ian said, looking from Jamie to me with a kind smile on his face.

“Are ye serious?” she asked, a smile spreading on her face. She jumped into his arms and held him tightly against her. I couldn’t help but smile — this family reunion was touching. I was also discovering a side of Jamie I had never seen before.

Jenny laughed and opened her eyes, and then she saw me. Her face changed, going from pure happiness to curiosity. “Ye brought a lass,” she said, the corner of her mouth curled up. She let go of him and Jamie stepped aside.

“Aye. Jenny, this is Claire Fraser, my wife,” he said with the same pride he carried when he introduced me to Ian. “Claire, my sister Jenny.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“A Sassenach,” she whispered, her smile turning into a grimace.

“Aye,” Jamie said, blushing slightly. “But she’s also a great healer and a good friend of mine. I love her verra much.”

“Janet…” Ian said, looking at his wife with worry. He didn’t want this magical moment to be ruined because of my presence. My heart was hammering in my chest and my palms were sweaty, waiting for her to say something.

“Was it ye who chose to marry her or was it all Colum’s work? I want to know.”

Jamie let out a sigh. “It was Colum, but I fell in love with her. And as much as I dinna like to say he was right… marrying her was the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

I couldn’t hide the smile on my face. Jamie often told me those words, but I never grew tired of hearing them.

Jenny’s face softened at the words and she looked at me with a small but genuine smile. “I believe ye, brother. Weel… I was cooking dinner, are ye hungry by chance?”
We spent the night talking with Ian and Jenny. They introduced us to their lovely children and we all ate together. I helped Jenny get the children ready for bed, and afterwards we joined Ian and Jamie by the fireplace in the living room.

I felt she was on her guard at first, but as soon as we were done eating, it was as if she had already adopted me as her sister. It felt so great. All my life, I had longed for a sister, and to see that it was the same for her made my heart full.

Also, seeing Jamie so happy to be reunited with his family made my love for him even stronger. I had never seen him like this. He seemed relaxed and simply happy to be with them. He often looked at me while smiling, and in his eyes I could see how thankful he was that I followed him across the ocean to America.

Jenny and Ian told me stories about Jamie’s childhood, making me laugh as I imagined the wee red-haired lad playing at Lallybroch. They told us about Willie, who was now living in New York with his family. Jenny told us that she was going to write to him first thing in the morning and ask him to come visit us. Jamie told his sister and her husband about our story. I was fascinated to hear his side of the story for the first time.

“Colum wanted us to get married to ease the tension with the clan Grant. I didna want to hear anything about it and when Claire arrived at the castle, I didn’t even go to meet her. We met the day after, in the kitchen, without even knowing who we were talking to,” he smiled sheepishly. “At that moment, I didna want to hear more of ‘Claire Beauchamp’ when there was a beautiful and funny lass like her walking around the castle. Ye can imagine the surprise when I saw her dressed in a wee white dress for the wedding. I was still verra angry at Colum, but I saw in her eyes that she was as scared as I was.”

Jamie decided not to talk about the consummating of the wedding, and I didn’t really mind. “One day she told me how angry she was about this situation and I realized that I had done more damage trying to save us from the obligations of this marriage. After that day by the stream, I realized that I was in love with her. I thought that maybe she understood me, since we were in the same situation after all. I think that when she arrived, I imagined that she wouldn’t mind this wedding. I didna ken about her uncle — that the Laird had broken his word to him, just like wi’ Da — and I thought that she didn’t mind. When I realized that, on the contrary, she was as angry as me, I felt bad for the way I acted, but I also felt relieved. At that moment, we started to bond, and now we’re here.” He smiled and took my hand.

“And why did you decide to leave Scotland for America?” Ian asked.

I felt Jamie tense. “We didn’t like the life at Leoch, and since you were here, Jamie thought that if we came, we’d have a family,” I said, looking up at him. He nodded and smiled at me.

“And what are you going to do, now?” Jenny asked.

That, we didn’t know yet.

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Jenny insisted that we stay for the night. She didn’t want her brother to leave so soon, so she let us sleep into Young Jamie’s room. Jamie and Maggie shared a bedroom, but there was no more room for him, so he occupied a small room right by the kitchen.
The room was warm with a fire burning in the chimney. I undressed and took a much needed bath. It was the first time I was properly washing since Boston, and it felt amazing to finally wash my hair and skin. Jamie washed after me and joined me in the small bed when he finished. The water had turned cold by the time he got out, and he was now shivering. Chuckling, I lifted the covers for him to jump in the bed and snuggle against me. Usually, he was the hot body, but tonight apparently it was me.

I rubbed his arms with my hands, trying to warm him up a little bit. “It feels good to wash,” I sighed in relief.

“Aye,” he chuckled. “I’ll just hope that I don’t freeze to death during the night.

Throwing the covers over, I got out of bed. “What are ye doing?” he asked.

I took the plaid on the bed and walked to the fire. “Come,” I called to him, and he followed. Sitting next to me, I wrapped the plaid around us and we snuggled in front of the fire. Jamie let out a happy sigh and rested his head on my shoulder.

When we left Scotland, I thought that being across the ocean would make me miss home, but finally, I was more than happy to be far away from Leoch. I was still thinking about her, about Malva. We were never going to know what happened to her and who killed her. I told myself that it didn’t matter, that she was a murderer herself, but she had been my friend once. Or, at least, I’d thought so. Her ghost haunted me and I knew I’d have to get used to it. A few months after her death, I was finally slowly starting to forget about everything.

“I’m glad to be here with you, Claire. I hope ye dinna regret coming here.”

“Absolutely not!” I exclaimed. “I love your family. I think… I think we’ve found a home with them.”

He smiled, truly happy to hear the words. “Aye, I thought so too. Jenny seemed to like ye, that’s a good sign.”

I chuckled and laid my head on his.

“You could start to work with Ian and I could work in the apothecary store downstairs. We could buy a small room close to here and live in it. Maybe Fergus could live with us and Murtagh could easily find a job as well,” I said. He smiled, but I could see in his eyes that it wasn’t what he had in mind. “What? You don’t think it’s a good idea?”

“Aye! Of course, Claire!”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded, looking down. “Aye, but… Ian told me about the lands and people coming from all over the world to buy a land and make a home. If we bought one, I could be a laird and we could have a house and a family living with us. Tenants. If Jenny and Willie decided to come live with us, we’d be twelve, plus Murtagh and Fergus. It would be a good beginning and Ian could quit working at the print shop. I ken he doesn’t like working there, as he prefers to work in the field. You could have a wee surgery with big windows… we’d have our own land with nobody coming to bother us. What do you think?”

The idea was certainly charming. I always loved the countryside better than towns, especially to make a life, to have a family. We’d never talked about it, but I think both Jamie and I really wanted to have children one day.
“I think that’s a lovely idea.”

Jamie’s smile grew and he bent down to kiss me deeply. “I’m sae happy we came here, Claire. I’ll miss Scotland, but I want to be where we can have the best life together. Just you and me and the people we love around us.”

We were dreamers. It seemed that everything was going to be easy, even though we knew the life in the countryside was hard — harder than the life in a town. But we were ready to face everything to protect our shot at happiness.
20 months later

“Jamie, will you please tell your daughter to eat?”

“If she doesna want it, we canna force her,” he shrugged. Julia was sitting in his arms, making sounds as Jamie made faces.

I sighed, coming to sit next to him. Our daughter looked at me with a big smile and round whisky eyes and let out a shriek. I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of her. She was so beautiful, with hair red like her father’s.

Every since the day she was born, five months ago, she was the most perfect child a parent could have asked for. At least, that was what Jenny had said. Julia was always smiling, she slept a lot, and she almost never cried. It was too good to be true. She was healthy and growing up very fast. Too fast.

After we decided to settle on Fraser’s Ridge, Jamie’s brother helped us build our house — and after a few months, he decided to stay and live with us. At first, we lived in a small house with Murtagh, and we were the only two families on the Ridge. Now, Jamie and I lived in a big house, and there were a couple of families and tenants on our land. There were Jenny and Ian, along with all their kids, Willie and his wife Katherine, and their four children, Murtagh, who lived with Jamie’s aunt.

Three months ago, we were sipping coffee on the porch when we heard horses coming to the house. It was Jocasta MacKenzie, making a big entrance. She was moving to North Carolina after her husband died in Scotland. She heard Jamie was the laird of a swath of land, and decided to make a home with us. That day, she met Murtagh.

“I havena seen ye since ye were a wee lad,” Jocasta smiled, putting a curl behind Jamie’s ear. “It’s sae good to see ye, Jamie. Ye look a lot like yer mother. But ye also have your father eyes. No’ the colour, but the kind eyes.”

“I’m glad to see ye as well, auntie. And I’m even happier that ye are coming to live wi’ us. All the family will be there,” he smiled. Jamie had been living in his Uncle’s castle for years, but it had never been a home, and his mother’s brothers had never felt like real family for him. But Jocasta was different. She had always been.

She smiled back and held his hand. “Aye. I’m verra glad to learn that yer wife is a healer. I’ll need to stay close to her, with my health. I’m an old lady and my sight is slowly turning its back on me. Do ye think I could live close to yer home? In case there is an emergency?” she asked, clearly worried about her health. She didn’t show it, but I could hear it in her voice. Jamie probably didn’t see it, but the men that came in my surgeries when I was with the Grants used to talk to me like this.

“Aye, of course, auntie. Maybe ye could take Murtagh’s house. It’s wee, but while we build one for ye, it should be fine.”

“Murtagh?” she asked, surprised to hear the name. “Murtagh Fitzgibbons Fraser?”
“The one and only,” said a deep voice coming from behind us.

When she looked up at him, Jocasta’s face lit up. “Murtagh,” she smiled, “old, grumpy lad.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Jocasta, yer still very direct, as I can see.”

I couldn’t believe what was happening in front of me. I had never seen Murtagh smile before, and now he was grinning like a kid. Meeting Jamie’s big smile, I could hardly stop myself from laughing.

That night, when Jamie and I were talking in bed, Julia sleeping between us, we couldn’t help but laugh at what had happened earlier. “They’re old, but they’re not dead, yet,” Jamie joked.

“Murtagh wasn’t sure if he wanted to stay with us, but now, I’m sure he’ll agree to work as a blacksmith here instead of in Wilmington.”

“Definitely,” Jamie said. We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“When do you think we’ll be invited to the wedding?” I joked.

He shook his head, wiping a tear. “I dinna ken. Six months?”

Two months later, a priest was marrying them in front of the big house.

They were fine living in the small house, because as Jocasta had said, “I’m too old to have bairns anyway”.

Having Jamie’s family around us was a blessing for him, but it was a blessing for me as well. I was very close to Jenny and to Katherine. We spent most of our days together with our babies. Jenny helped me a lot in the surgery, going so far as to say that if I wanted to teach her some things, she’d be happy to learn so she could help me in the future. I was glad to hear that, but I also felt a sinking feeling every time she was with me in the surgery. I couldn’t help but think of Malva.

I knew fine well that Jenny had a kind heart and was a true friend, but I couldn’t help but see the young girl and her grey eyes for a second when I looked at her. I tried to not talk about what happened in Scotland, but the closer we became, the more I felt the need to tell her about it. One day, I couldn’t hide it anymore. We were in the surgery, and I let it all out. She listened and she even cried with me. “That is horrible,” she’d said, “but that is also all in the past.”

“I know.”

Slowly, Malva’s ghost stopped haunting me, and a few months after the incident, I could finally sleep an entire night without dreaming of her. Then, Julia was born, and all my life revolved around her, the life on the Ridge, and my work as a healer. Nothing else mattered. What happened in Scotland stayed in Scotland.

“Sassenach,” Jamie said, entering the surgery without making a noise.

“Jesus H. Christ! You scared me,” I said, turning around to face him. He grinned and walked to me.

“Willie and Ian have gone hunting, and Jenny and Katherine are at the river. I think Jocasta is knitting in her house, but I havena seen Murtagh yet, so God knows what they’re up to,” he
They are worse than horny teenagers.”

He frowned. “Aye, I guess. Who can blame them, though?”

“They have more sex than us,” I shrugged, going back to my plants.

“Probably,” Jamie chuckled as he went to grab Julia, who was lying in a crib. “Hello baby,” he kissed her forehead. “Isn’t she beautiful?” he asked, turning to show her to me.

“Yes, she is,” I smiled sheepishly, “you say this every time you take her in your arms.”

“But she really is,” he looked at her proudly. “She will break hearts when she’s older. Just like her mother,” he said, looking up at me.

I rolled my eyes and went back to my plants, not hearing Jamie walk up behind me. He kissed my neck, his hands resting on my hips. “What I meant when I said everybody is gone,” he whispered in my ear, making the hair on my body stand up, “is that they won’t interrupt us.” He kissed the sensitive skin behind my ear, a small moan escaping his lips. “We’re always too tired at night, and we are never alone during the day.” He ran his hands down to take a firm hold of my buttocks.

“Jamie!” I exclaimed. “Not in front of the baby!”

He chuckled and turned me so I was now facing him. “Why no’? She’s only five months old, she willna remember this.”

“Still… it’s weird. I feel like she’s watching us.”

He laughed out loud and buried his face in the crook of my neck. “Please, Sassenach.” We both turned to look at our red-headed daughter. Her eyes were now closed. “See? Tell me ye dinna want me, and I’ll leave ye to your plants. But if ye do, we need to hurry up before everyone comes back.”

I couldn’t help but smile. It was all it took for him to lift me up and put me on the table. I let out a shriek of surprise. He kissed me deeply, his tongue seeking entrance into my mouth as his hands explored my body, fondling my breasts through the fabric of my dress. He lifted my skirt and pushed down his breeks.

“Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder,” I said, kissing him. I took hold of his throbbing cock, making him moan in my ear. “And the cock harder.”

He chuckled and pulled back to look at me. His blue eyes were dark with lust and his lips were wet, making me ache to kiss him again. “Feeling poetic today?” He positioned himself and entered me with a powerful thrust that made us both moan. “Not too loud, Sassenach. Jocasta is going to hear you.”

Burying my face in the crook of his neck, I closed my eyes and surrendered to the feeling of him inside of me. I pressed myself against him, needing to be closer. He rolled his hips in a steady rhythm, moaning every time he entered me.

“It’s you Jocasta is going to hear,” I breathed.

“Then make me shut up,” he said, kissing me.
Kissing him back, I put my arms around his neck and crossed my legs around his waist, pushing him against me. “Oh god,” I closed my eyes and bit the skin of his neck, “Jamie, I—” I cried out and he joined me, thrusting one last time with a deep groan.

We stayed in silence for a moment, catching our breath, until he finally pulled out of me. I smiled shyly and he kissed my forehead. “Do you need to…?” he blushed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll clean after.”

He nodded and looked down at his feet.

“Julia doesn’t seem too troubled by this,” I observed. She was sleeping peacefully.

“Aye, I told ye.”

I looked up at him and met his eyes. Blue like the ocean, and softly looking at me. I kissed him again, not wanting him to leave me to go work. We didn’t have much time during the day. He was always wandering around the land, taking care of business, or taking care of our daughter. All the while, I had the surgery and many responsibilities too.

“I’ll see ye later for dinner. I think Mrs. Crook is cooking potatoes for tonight,” he smiled and kissed me one last time before going back to business.

That night, we all gathered at our home for dinner. It was a pleasant evening and the food was delicious. After eating, Katherine went back to their house because their daughter was feeling sick, and I went to put Maggie to bed with Jenny before heading back into the living room. Jamie was sitting by the fireplace, Julia sleeping safe and sound in his arms. He was talking with Willie and Ian, sipping a glass of whisky. They invited us to sit with them. They asked about me, about my childhood, and where I was from. I felt bad to lie to them about my past because even though I trusted them, I didn’t want to take any chance and tell them I was from the future. After all, a secret wasn’t one for very long on the Ridge. So I answered the question as best as I could, and they seemed pleased by the answer.

They left our home hours later, leaving the kids who were already asleep. When Jamie and I went to bed, Julia woke up hungry. I sat by the fire in our room and gave her dinner. Jamie was lying in bed, his eyes closed, but I knew he wasn’t asleep.

“It’s really nice that your family is here, Jamie. I don’t regret staying in America, and I don’t regret buying this land. I wouldn’t change a single thing.”

He opened his eyes and smiled softly. “Aye, me neither, Sassenach. I feel like I am where I am supposed to be. As a Laird, I mean. And I think you do as well. As a healer.”

“Yes, of course,” I smiled. “I never really felt like I had a home before I met you. And when we were in Scotland, everything was so complicated, it seemed like the entire universe was against us. Here, everything feels right. Things are not always easy, but it makes sense in the end.”

He nodded. “Aye. I’m glad ye do. I think this land is the best place to raise Julia. To raise a family.”

6 years later

“Mama! Ellen willna stop pulling my hair!” Julia exclaimed.

“Ellen, stop this,” I said, taking the little girl in my arms. I sat next to Julia on the floor. She was
playing with little figurines, lost in her imagination. “What are you playing with?” I asked her, rocking Ellen in my arms. She was only a year old and, unlike her sisters, she was always crying and needed a lot of attention. Julia and Brianna, who was now three years old, suffered a lot from it.

“It’s a story,” she smiled shyly. “This is Mister Tomson,” she said, showing me one of the figurines I’d made for her birthday with Jamie’s help. “He’s a ghost.”

“A ghost?” I asked, surprised.

“Aye. Uncle Murtagh told me about ghosts. But he said I shouldn’t tell ye about it,” she blushed slightly. I couldn’t help but smile. She was the cutest little girl.

“And who’s this one?” I asked, pointing to the other figurine in her hand.

“This is you!” she exclaimed. “Mister Tomson needs your help! If ye dinna heal him he’ll become a ghost forever.”

She had a very vivid imagination. “Then send him to me,” I smiled, kissing her head.

Looking down, I saw Brianna looking at me with her round blue eyes. Unlike her sisters, she had brown hair like mine. Jamie and I thought that her hair might change to red when she grows up, but inside, I was happy that she looked a bit more like me.

“Sassenach,” Jamie stormed in the living room and bent next to me, kissing me before kissing Julia and Ellen’s foreheads. “Where’s Brianna?”

I pointed to the couch with my chin. She was sleeping deeply, her thumb in her mouth. “She’s been feeling quite sick today. She complained of a headache, and her throat is sore.”

He walked next to the couch and sat next to her. He ran a hand in her long, red hair and smiled. “I hope she’ll feel better after a wee nap and a good supper. I think Mrs. Crook is cooking potatoes,” he smiled.

I rolled my eyes. “You with potatoes.”

“It’s the best food with meat. And it’s verra filling. It has to be, when you eat for two,” he said, a smirk forming on his lips. Since I told Jamie that I was pregnant, again, a few weeks ago, he never stopped making sure I was well. He was following me everywhere while he could, taking care of the girls as much as possible, not wanting me to get too tired — and most importantly, he massaged my feet every night before we went to sleep.

We often wondered if the baby would be another girl or if we’d finally have a boy. I always said I didn’t mind a girl, but it would be nice to have a boy and experience raising a son.

“I think it’ll be another girl,” he said one night as we were lying in bed. His big hand was caressing my big belly, so round it looked like a balloon about to burst. “If it’s another girl, we could name her Glenna? After yer maid?”

I smiled and nodded, feeling a pinch in my heart at the thought of my friend.

“And if it’s a boy?”

“Henry.”
Looking up at him, I met his blue eyes looking softly at me. I smiled and nodded. “Do you hope it’ll be a boy? Someone to take the reigns of the Ridge when we’re gone?”

He shrugged. “Nah. It’ll all belong to Julia,” Jamie smiled. “I ken she would be a great Laird. She’s already a leader, when she plays wi’ her cousins and the kids of the Ridge. She’s smart and she’s not afraid of telling her opinions.”

“She will do great,” I smiled, happy to hear this answer.

“One day, she will marry a lad who will help her with the things she doesna want to do,” he chuckled, “and they’ll have beautiful children. I just want… I want everything to be fine for her and her sisters. I hope to make enough money so they never want for anything. Brianna will want to learn from ye, I ken that. She’s already so intrigued by yer surgery, unlike Julia.”

“I knew she would remember the time we had sex in front of her,” I chuckled.

Jamie smiled and shook his head. “And Ellen will be a writer. She’ll write tales about the habitants of Fraser’s Ridge, books and poems. Everybody around the world will read them one day. Ellen Fraser, the writer.”

“Or maybe she’ll want to work with her sister in the field or with Bree in the surgery.”

“Maybe,” he smiled, “but they will do great things, our daughters.”

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter to go!
A Wonderful Life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jamie and I lived the most wonderful life on Fraser’s Ridge.

Three years after giving birth to Ellen, Glenna came into the world. This time, Julia helped me a lot with taking care of her, always wanting to act like a mother with her. They were so beautiful to see together. Every time I looked at them, my heart would beam with joy.

Five years later, our fifth — and very last — daughter was born. Jane Fraser.

When Julia turned thirteen, she started spending a lot of time working on the farm with her father, all the while studying with her Aunt Jocasta, who taught her to read and about history. She was growing up so fast — at twelve, she was already taller than me. She looked so much like her father: the curly red hair, the build, and the way she moved all reminded me of Jamie. At the age of nineteen, she married the son of one of the tenants who had been living on the Ridge for a few months. The day they arrived and I saw him looking over at Julia, I knew they would fall in love and eventually marry.

Julia, who was so invested in the development of the Ridge and the business she made with her father, never noticed that George only had eyes for her until he finally decided to talk to her during a Gathering. Six months later, they were married. After a few years living in the house Jamie had built for her family, Julia gave birth to a son, Jonas. Being a grandmother for the first time. I loved Jonas like my own son, the son we never had.

Jamie never stopped talking about how much our second daughter, Brianna, looked like me as she grew up. She looked like a real born-and-bred Beauchamp, and I wished my parents could see her. She reminded me a lot of my father, and it warmed my heart to see him in her. He would be so proud. Jamie’s predictions about Brianna wanting to learn more about botany were true. As soon as Jocasta taught her how to read, she started reading my botany books and diaries to practice. When she turned fourteen, she started spending her free time with me in the surgery; and at the age of nineteen, I let her do a surgery with me. Eventually, Brianna moved to New York to become a surgeon. She often wrote to us about how life was difficult for a female surgeon, but that she wouldn’t change her life for anything in the world. A few years later, she married another surgeon named Robert, and they had two beautiful children, Jemmy and Amanda Claire. They didn’t travel often to come see us, but every time they did, we were so happy to see them.

Ellen died at the age of two. She became quite sick, and I was never able to save her. For years, I thought the sadness I carried would kill me. I missed her every day of my life. There was never a minute that occurred without feeling a weight on my chest at the idea that I was never going to see her again. It was Brianna who saved me.

I was lying in my bed, crying, when she came to tell me she couldn’t find Glenna anywhere. They were playing by the river, and for a minute, she didn’t pay attention to her sister. When she looked up from her book, Glenna was out of sight. She searched everywhere, but she couldn’t find her. Jamie was in Wilmington for the week, and the men living close to the Big House had gone with him. She didn’t want to alarm me, but she was panicked and didn’t know what to do.

It was at that moment that I realized that the pain of losing Ellen was making me waste the years with my four other daughters. I knew that I had to live and smile for her, who didn’t have this
chance at life.

We eventually found Glenna, hidden somewhere behind a tree. I hugged her and Brianna tightly, and the three of us cried for hours. At that moment, I changed my mindset. Day by day, I tried to go back to the Claire I once was. I spent more time in the surgery. Jamie, who had been mourning on his own, asked me to share my pain with him. “I need ye, Sassenach,” he told me, one night as we were lying in the dark of our room. “I canna talk to ye about Ellen when ye’re like this. But... I need to. I need to talk to ye.” Together, we carried the weight of losing her.

Glenna loved to read. At twenty, she replaced Jocasta, after she had lost all her sight, and started teaching the kids on the Ridge how to read, about history, and a little bit of everything. She never married, but I knew she had secretly been seeing Joan, the daughter of one of the tenants, for a few months. She never told me about it — she probably never told anyone. I wished she did, but I knew she was afraid that people on the Ridge would not accept her the way she was. She moved to the city at twenty-five and lived a wonderful life there.

Jane worked with Jamie and Julia. She was interested in building things that could make the life on the lands easier for all of us. She was really talented and impressed all of the men. I was very proud of her, and I knew Jamie showed her creations to all of the visitors.

The years spent with our daughters were the most amazing years of my life. Now that they were grown up and no longer lived in our house, I missed them a lot, even if they were never really far.

“Sassenach,” Jamie told me, “I can hear ye thinkin’ from here.”

We were sitting on a plaid in the middle of the forest. In front of us, the sight of the vast lands of Fraser’s Ridge that had made us decide to settle down here years ago. We were going back to our home after a few days spent in Wilmington to see Glenna. It was early morning, but I knew it was going to be a lovely day after the night we had just experienced.

“I was just thinking about the years we’ve spent together,” I said, smiling.

He sat up and looked up at me. Most of his red hair had turned grey, and he had wrinkles around his eyes, but he was as dashing as he was at twenty. “Really?” The corner of his mouth curled up. “And what were ye thinking? Ye don’t regret anything, I hope.”

“I regret the nineteen years I didn’t know you.”

He smiled and kissed me.

“Actually, I was just thinking about when I was traveling to Leoch. Of all the stories I had in my mind about our future together, nothing was close to what happened. I never thought I would love you so much, especially right after I met you.”

“I was an arse.”

“Yes, and I was scared of everything. Even of you. I was scared I would fall in love with you while you would hate me for ruining your life.”

He took my hand and kissed my knuckles. “I loved ye from the moment I laid eyes on ye. I just didna ken at the time, but I do now.”

I smiled and looked down at our joined hands.

“If it wasn’t for ye coming to my room... threatening to cut my throat open,” he joked, “maybe we
wouldn’t be here today. Ye were the one who came to me the first time, when ye traveled from yer family to mine. And ye were the one who came to me the second time, when ye crossed the line I had drawn between us.”

“Someone had to do it,” I said sheepishly. “And I don’t regret it for anything in the world. We live a wonderful life. We have a home that’s ours, and we have the most beautiful and intelligent daughters in the world. And I love you. So much, that it hurts me.”

“I wake up every day, and I find that I love you more than I did the day before.”

I kissed him deeply, wrapping my arms around his neck. He pulled back and looked deep into my eyes. “When the day shall come that we do part,” he said softly, “if my last words are not ‘I love ye’ — ye’ll ken it was because I didna have time.”

Chapter End Notes

I must admit I am sad to see this version of Jamie and Claire go. This story will always have a special place in my heart. I would like to thank everyone who read Attachment, liked, rebloged and commented. I really felt a lot of support from all of you, so thank you!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!