Recreate Me

by claryclark

Summary

Jamie is a new police officer living in London when he meets Claire Beauchamp, a NICU nurse, in a coffee shop. They form a close friendship, with Jamie hesitant to let it become something more, troubled by demons from his past.

Notes

G’Morning! So, this is my newest story. You may notice it contains some elements of a story I posted and took down a few weeks ago, but it’s an entirely different story now. It’s very angsty because apparently I live for drama!
You don’t need it, she told herself. You are working a 10 hour shift. You do not need your cell phone to do that.

She groaned, pushing the heel of her hand to her forehead, adjusting the bag on her shoulder as the internal debate whirled on.

Instead of being tucked away in its usual space— the inner pocket of her purse— her phone was likely where she’d carelessly left it— sitting on a table by the window at Bleecker Street Brews. A fact she’d neglected to realize until she was only two blocks away from the hospital. It would take her at least fifteen minutes to walk back to the coffee house by her new flat.

Be serious Beauchamp, another imaginary voice in her head chimed in, it’s a very expensive phone. One you can’t afford to replace. Not going back is irresponsible.

The matter settled, she spun on her heels and set off down the street at an uncharacteristically brisk pace. It was moments like this that made her especially grateful for the fact that, as a nurse, she got to go to work in comfy pink scrubs and sneakers. She watched with sympathy as her fellow twenty-somethings made their morning commutes in stiff looking suits and high heels.

The London air was unusually hot, even for July, and by the time she made it back to the coffee house, her forehead and upper lip were glistening with sweat and her hair was falling half way out of her high ponytail. When she went to the table by the window, she saw her phone was no longer there. She looked everywhere in the general area of where she’d been sitting— pulling out chairs and pushing menus to the side. Her phone was gone.

She turned around, quickly scanning the store. The only employee she could see was the barista at the cash register. Not knowing what else to do, she got in line. By the time she was second, she began to tap her foot. She didn’t even realize she was doing it until the man in front of her paused from ordering and turned to peer down at her.

"Am I taking too long, Lass?" Came the deep Scottish burr from several inches over her head.

Jolted from her impatient thoughts, she snapped her head upwards. He was tall—very tall, towering over almost everyone else in the coffee shop. His sparkling blue eyes were aided in their assault of
her senses with a dazzling smile and a neatly cropped head of bright red hair. All that combined with his pristinely pressed London Metropolitan Police uniform-- was enough to throw her more than a little off of her game.

Suddenly, she was very aware of the less than flattering fit of her scrubs. Her face was engulfed in a red flush of embarrassment. "Sorry— I’m not ordering anything. I was just on my way to work and I realized I left my cell phone here.”

“Ah,” he laughed, moving aside to allow her a path to the counter. “We’ve all been there.”

She smiled apologetically, stepping in front of him. Without thinking, she shrugged off her bag and perched it on the counter.

“Did someone find a cell phone over there earlier?” She asked, pointing back in the direction of the corner where she’d been sitting.

“What does it look like?” The teenage boy asked, barely looking up.

“It’s an iphone in a purple otterbox case,” she told him. “The screen’s cracked a bit in the upper right hand corner.”

Without another word, the barista walked away, presumably to go check for her phone. Turning back around, she realized that the police officer she’d cut in line was watching her, smiling. Her mouth went dry and she felt her stomach drop to the floor.

He stuck out a hand to her. “Jamie Fraser.”

‘Claire Beauchamp,” she said in turn, shaking his hand.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you in here before,” he mused, tilting his head to one side.

“This is my first time here,” she admitted, hoping he couldn’t hear the sound of her heart hammering in her chest.
Her mind was in full blown panic mode. A handsome stranger had initiated a conversation with her and she was not prepared to meet the challenge. Flirty texting, suggestive snapchats or even a few drunken exchanges on Tinder—sure, no problem! But talking to a stranger in public?

*Make small talk, be flirty*, she thought frantically, trying recall the tips she’d stored in her mind from the countless issues of Cosmo she’d read over the years. *Be coy, ask him questions, seem interested*-what would Carrie Bradshaw do!

“So, uhm…” She began lamely, grabbing for the first thing that came to mind. “What do you do?”

His eyebrows rose to his hairline as he looked down at his police officer’s uniform and then back up at her.

“Oh, right…” She sputtered, cheeks flaming. “Sorry… Mondays, you know…” She trailed off, choking on nervous laughter.

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “I think it’s Wednesday, Lass.”

Just when Claire thought she was going to fall over and die of embarrassment, the barista returned with her phone.

“Is this it?”

She took it without really looking. “Yes. Thanks.”

As she bolted for the door, she mumbled her goodbye to Jamie. “Nice meeting you.”

Back out on the street, she tried to keep her internal chastising to an absolute minimum, focusing her attention on the work day that lay ahead. *So what if you made a fool of yourself in front of some random guy in a coffee shop?,* she reasoned. *It’s not like you’ll ever see him again.*

“Claire!” The deep Scottish burr rang from behind her.
Stunned, she turned around to see Jamie jogging to catch up with her.

“Ye left this.”

To her horror, she realized he held her forgotten purse, dangling from his outstretched hand. She froze, all words stuck in her throat as she turned the shade of a tomato. He was smirking down at her with a not so subtle hint of amusement lighting his eyes.

To make matters worse, she suddenly noticed the way his utility belt hing off of his sculpted, trim hips—heavy laden with baton, ticket book, pepper spray and all other things a police officer might need throughout the course of his day. The morning sunlight was shimmering in the coppery red of his hair and he looked as though he’d just walked off the cover of this year’s “Hotties of Metropolitan Police Services” charity calendar.

With what little dignity she could muster, she held her head high and plucked the bag from his hand.

“Thank you,” she said primly, before taking off down the street as fast as she possibly could.

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For Jamie, it started out as just another day. He woke to the blaring screech of his alarm at 5 am on the dot. He lived in a studio flat, near Kensington. It was a trendy place, all exposed brick and stainless steel appliances. He poured himself an ice cold glass of orange juice, drinking deeply before making his way over to the pull up bar he’d mounted on the frame of his bathroom door.

Fifteen minutes later, he was changed into his running clothes, popping two airpods in his ears as he left his flat, and set off on his usual route. The gym he belonged to was two and a half miles away—running there from his flat was a good warm-up, running back a good cool down.

He both loved and hated going to the gym this time of day. On the one hand, it wasn’t particularly crowded and he could work through his routine without having to stop to wait for a machine. On the other, the people who were there at that time tended to irk his nerves in the worse way. Gym rats, obsessed with perfecting their physical forms for purely vain reasons. Standing in front of the mirror in the weight room, phones raised, aiming for the perfect snapshot.
It was all Jamie could do, not to roll his eyes. Sure, he’d spent the same countless hours, molding his body into the powerful, hard thing it was. But not for the sake of vanity. He’d been fifteen, nose broken under his Uncle’s fist, when he decided he wouldn’t be weak. His body was made for a purpose. And that purpose was survival.

Back at his flat, he ran through the shower, before pulling on the pieces of his uniform. The tv mounted on the wall in his living room area was big enough that you could see it from basically anywhere in the flat. He flicked it on, turning to the news, before making his way to the kitchen. He listened over the hum of the blender as the announcer described a recent string of armed robberies, targeting hospitals and pharmacies in the east end. Given that the area was nowhere near his precinct’s jurisdiction, it didn’t really spark his interest.

Glancing at his watch, he didn’t feel rushed as he sucked down his usual peanut-butter and banana protein shake. At seven, he set out the door. It was a bright, hot day, causing him to push a pair of aviator sunglasses on to his face before he’d even stepped off the front stoop of his flat and on to the pavement. Halfway to the station, he turned onto Bleecker Street for his usual pit stop at his favorite coffee house.

He’d just gotten to the front of the line, and was opening his mouth to order when he heard the tap, tap, tap of an impatient foot behind him. The next second, his brain ceased all normal function. His awareness fragmented into a random, nonsensical torrent of observations.


“Am I taking too long, Lass?” He asked, once he regained the ability to form words.

She looked at him, and before he knew it he was drunk, drowning in a pair of whisky eyes that spoke to the very marrow in his bones. Her cheeks flushed an even deeper, sweeter shade of red and his only thought was Christ, is she even real?

"Sorry— I’m not ordering anything. I was just on my way to work and I realized I left my cell phone here."

He said something, he had no idea what, only hoped it wasn’t as horribly daft as the thoughts running through his mind. She stepped around him, leaning over the counter to ask after her mobile. Before he knew it, his gaze was shifting down to admire the sweet curves of her arse, flicking back up in embarrassment a moment later.
She turned back around, and before he knew it, he was sticking out a hand. “Jamie Fraser.”

“Claire Beauchamp.” Came her response, and the name flooded his ears like honey.

His brain, that part of it that knew who he was and what he had been—what he had done, was screaming at him. Walk away, it told him. Don’t flirt, don’t engage. Yeah she’s cute, and sweet and bonny and looks like everything good in this world wrapped up in a pair of pink scrubs. Which is exactly why she’s off-fucking limits.

And yet, much to his chagrin, he did flirt, slipping on the mask he’d perfected over the years. The one that allowed him to hide the true nature of himself, and all the jagged, twisted secrets that lay within. The one he’d used often as a tool of manipulation, a way to earn trust. He hated himself for using it now, and yet he couldn’t seem to stop. Wanted her to smile at him some more, wanted those teeth digging into that full, pink lip, wanted to see that flush filling her cheeks.

She was such a tiny thing, looking so delicate Jamie was sure he would break her if he even touched her.

The next minute she was leaving and he was trying to talk himself out of going after her when he noticed her bag still sitting on the counter. He grabbed it, following her out onto the street.

“Claire!”

He gave her the bag, and stood rooted to the spot for a long time, watching her walk away. He was still thinking about her, specifically her mess of curls and flushed cheeks, when he made it to the station twenty minutes later.

His captain, Murtagh Fitzgibbons, was already waiting in the briefing room. The burly old scot arched a brow at him over a pair of thin, gold framed spectacles, taking in his dazed appearance.

“Somethin’ on yer mind, Lad?”

Blinking, Jamie shook his head, as if he could shake the thoughts of Claire Beauchamp right out of his mind. “No sir.”
“Good.” Murtagh pursed his lips, considering him. “Busy day today. Stay focused.”

“Aye.” Jamie sighed, taking a seat near the front of the room.

Stay focused, he thought, repeating the order to himself. Remember why you’re here. You’re gonna make something decent of yourself if it fucking kills you.

And that other reason, the one he never said out loud because it seemed wrong to even hope for it. He didn’t know if redemption was even possible for someone like him. But dammit if he wasn’t at least going to try.

September 2004

Jamie sat in the front seat of his Da’s old refurbished pick up truck, staring out the window, watching the Scottish countryside go by. He tried to focus on the rolling green hills, and not on the nerves twisting tight in his stomach.

“Say something,” he said finally.

Brian sighed heavily. “I dinna ken what there is to say, Lad.”

Jamie was silent, and brooding, because he was fourteen and everything in the world seemed unfair.

“I didna start it,” he pointed out. “He hit me first.”

“I’m not interested in excuses,” his Father said firmly.

“What would ye’ve had me do then, Da?” He demanded. “Sit there and let him hit me?”

“Och, son yer missin’ the point.”
Brian was suddenly distracted by a car approaching them quickly, eyes flicking to the rearview mirror, before going back to the road.

“I dinna care that ye hit him. I care that ye hit him from behind.”

“So?”

“So,” He drew out pointedly. “Ye should never hit a man while his back is turned.”

Jamie pursed his lips, considering this. “Why?”

“Well, Jamie, it’s just no’ right. No’ a fair fight if the other lad can’t defend himself.”

Before Jamie could ask any more questions, the car behind them started honking its horn.

“What is this guy’s problem?” Brian muttered, eyes flicking to the rear view mirror again.

It was a one lane road and while Brian was going the speed limit, it didn’t seem to be quite enough to whoever was driving the shiny red sports car behind them. A few more minutes, and the car surged forward, crashing into the rear of the truck, pushing them off the road.

The red car pulled off behind them, and the sound of a car door could be heard slamming as the other driver got out of the car.

“Stay in the car,” Brian ordered, already unbuckling his seat belt.

“But—”

“Do as I say.”

Jamie sat in his seat obediently, ears straining to hear what was happening. His father and the
motorist were standing at the rear of the truck, down the little slope in the embankment where they’d been forced to pull over. He didn’t have a clear view of either of them.

At the sound of his father’s strangled scream, he bounded out of the car.

“Da!” He screamed in horror, coming to the end of the car to see his father, on his back, a knife deep in his gut, driven by the stranger’s hand.

The man was tall, and well dressed, smelling heavily of liquor, with thick black hair slicked back on his head.

Jamie lunged, not quick enough, not big enough, not strong enough. This man was too big, and too tall and too strong. He leapt to his feet quickly at Jamie’s approach, punching Jamie hard in the stomach, knocking him off his feet.

Jamie could do nothing but lie on his back, gulping air trying to catch his breath as the stranger drove away, wheels screeching. He struggled to roll over, came up on his hands and knees, crawled over to his father.

“What do I do?” He demanded, terrified and frantic. “Tell me what to do!”

Brian’s eyes focused on his son, filled with a bone deep terror that Jamie would never forget, as his mouth filled with blood. Gurgling and gasping, trying to stay alive.

Jamie pressed down on his father’s abdomen, dimly recalling from health class that you had to put pressure on wounds to stop them from bleeding. He looked helplessly at the road, desperate for the help that wasn’t coming.

It was too late anyway. The gurgling sounds were getting quieter, as Brian struggled less and less for breath.

“Da, please…” he begged, a single tear falling slowly down his face, dripping off his chin as the light slowly died from his father’s eyes.
It was the last day of Claire’s first week as a nurse in the NICU at Trinity hospital. And while she took no small amount of joy in caring for her tiny patients, she wasn’t at all sad that she wouldn’t be seeing them tomorrow.

During her lunch break, she enjoyed a quick meal with fellow nurses Joe Abernathy and Geillis Duncan. Joe worked in Pediatrics, Geillis in the A&E. They were becoming something of a trio. Joe was an American by birth, but came to England to attend the University of Cambridge with his girlfriend at the time. Though the relationship didn't last, Joe made the decision not to return to the States. With Geillis being from a small town in the Scottish highlands, Claire was the only one among them of true English origin.

All of them were new graduates, fresh out of nursing school and started at the hospital around the same time. Now, at the end of their first four-day stint, they were all looking forward to a much needed four days off.

Joe pushed his untouched cheeseburger to the side, running two heavy hands over his face. "I'm so tired, I think I could sleep through fireworks."

"Me too," Geillis chimed in, craning and rubbing at her sore neck. "Ye'd think they were tryin' to work us into the ground."

Claire was only half listening, munching absently on a baby carrot. In her head, she was imagining up a thousand different scenarios to replace the horrendously embarrassing memory from the morning. How she could have been smoother, more sophisticated and just a touch less spastic.

"Did you hear me Claire?" Joe asked, waving a hand to get her attention.

"Hmm?" She hummed, blinking as she returned to reality.
"I was just saying that my flatmate and I are going for a few drinks tonight."

Geillis turned to him with a knitted brow. "I didna ken ye had a flatmate."

"Oh, yeah. He was on the rugby team with me back at Uni," Joe explained quickly. "What do you say though— want to join us?"

"I'm in," Geillis offered with a shrug.

"Oh, um..." she trailed off. A quick succession of conflicting thoughts followed. You're exhausted. You could stand to have a little fun. You have a mountain of laundry to do. This is a new job, and a new city--you need to make friends!

"Sure, why not!" She finally answered, with a quick half smile. Stealing a quick glance at her watch, she realized her lunch break was rapidly nearing its end. "I gotta run. Text me the details?"

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She finished her shift at 6 with plans to meet Joe and Geillis at a pub in Kensington at 9. A quick search on her phone told her that the pub was a mere five minute walk from her flat.

She was running through a mental catalogue of her closet, trying to plan an outfit for the evening when she reached her building. She smiled to herself as she climbed the stairs of the front stoop, completely enamored with her new home.

It was an elegantly crafted white stone structure- the subtle hints of it's past life as a grand London mansion could be seen in the mismatched curves of bay windows and in the ornate carvings adorning its face.

Claire always got a kick out of wondering what it would have been like to live here before it was renovated and turned into flats. It had been a stroke of luck that she'd come to be one of its current occupants. A stroke of luck, and the good natured generosity of Louise de Rohan, a lifelong friend she’d met while studying abroad in Paris.
Louise had taken on the flat when she moved to London the year before and, as the daughter of a wealthy French banker, she could afford to rent her spare room out to Claire for much less than its market value. Plus, the fact that Louise was almost never home— always either out of town, or at her boyfriend’s, it was almost like Claire had her own flat.

Sometime later, in the shower, she sniffed suspiciously at her new shampoo. She’d ordered it last week on impulse when one of her favorite lifestyle bloggers recommended the product on Instagram, with the claim that it could “tame the untamable.” With a dubious arch of her brow, she squeezed out a dollop of the rosy pink liquid into her open palm.

Sometime later, she was standing before her closet, wrapped in a towel and still dripping. Eventually, she settled on a billowy white top tucked into her favorite skirt— brown corduroy with buttons up the front. She laid her selections out on her unmade bed, hooked up the blow dryer, attached a diffuser and ran it through her hair before getting dressed.

It was a tedious task, searching for her makeup through the chaos of her bedroom. For some reason, she never managed to consolidate her collection of various cosmetics into a single place. Her primer and foundation were zipped up in the Vera Bradley bag tucked behind the small tv on her dresser. Eyeliner— black liquid, because new London Claire was a risk taker— rolling around in the bottom of the cross-body purse she sometimes carried on nights out.

She stood in front of the full length mirror hanging on the back of her bedroom door, leaning in close as she blended concealer into the heavily shadowed space beneath her eyes. After breezing through her go-to makeup routine with a practiced efficiency, she was ready to head out the door.

"There you are!" Joe greeted her with a grin. "Now, what are you ladies drinking?"

"Whisky neat, if ye please," Geillis said without hesitation.
Claire took a moment, considering. "Just a glass of whatever red is cheapest."

"You got it!"

"It's nice to be out of the hospital for a change is it no'?" Geillis mused after Joe headed to the bar.

"It is actually." She admitted with a smile. The first week of the new job had been intense, to say the least. After four straight days of nothing but Nurse Beauchamp, it was nice to just be plain old Claire again. "What's Joe's flatmate like?"

"Haven't met him. I only got here a minute or so before you did."

A minute later, Joe returned. "C'mon, Rupert’s outback."

World's End also sported a spacious back patio space, complete with picnic tables, and draping strings of twinkling lights. Joe led them over to a table in the corner, introducing them to a somewhat stocky man with brown hair and big round jovial cheeks.

"Rupert Mackenzie. Pleased to make yer acquaintance!" He beamed, shaking each woman's hand in turn. "I hope ye dinna mind, but I invited an old friend of mine to join us."

He turned to Claire and Geillis. “Distant cousin of mine. He was at Cambridge 4 or 5 years ahead of Joe and I.”

Joe shrugged noncommittally. "The more the merrier."

Suddenly Rupert's gaze snapped on someone behind them. "Och, and here he is now!"

Claire could literally feel the color draining from her face as she turned to greet this newest arrival. She barely heard the round of introductions as she stood there, trying not to make eye contact, lest anyone see through her glass face and into the myriad of thoughts swirling through her mind.

No longer in his police uniform, he was the picture of casual sexiness in jeans and a dark grey henley
He wore the sleeves rolled up, revealing the rigid muscle of his forearms. The buttons at the collar were undone, allowing the swirls of auburn chest hair to peek through.

Rupert clapped a hand on his shoulder, presenting him to the group. “Everyone this is Jamie Fraser.”

Joe’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, looking from Rupert to Jamie with wide eyes. “Jamie Fraser? As in—”

“Aye,” Jamie said, cutting him off as reached out to shake his hand. “You must be Joe. Rupert’s told me loads about ye over the years. It’s nice to finally meet ye.”

“Yeah, um…” Joe said slowly, cautiously, like he wasn’t quite sure. “You too.”

Claire watched, feeling like she was outside of her body as Jamie reached out to shake Geillis’s hand, murmuring words of greeting.

Next, Rupert turned to Claire. “And this is—”

"No need," he smirked, bringing a bottle of Newcastle to his lips. "We've met already."

Geillis, Rupert and Joe, all turned to her in question.

"That we have." Claire confirmed, doing her best imitation of nonchalant. Tipping her head back, she drained the remaining contents of her glass in one giant gulp.

"Oh, would you look at that." She mumbled, already moving away. "Time for a refill."

She spent the better part of the evening doing her level best to avoid Jamie's attention and glances. No doubt he thought her positively raving after their brief encounter that morning. She wasn't in the mood to be subject to teasing, no matter how well intentioned.

Despite her efforts, he managed to corner her at the bar an hour or two into the evening when she went to order another round. She started when he put a hand on the small of her back, leaning his
head down to speak to her in that low Scottish burr.

"Will I see ye tomorrow, Lass?"

Surprised by his question, she turned her head toward him just the slightest bit. "What?"

"Tomorrow morning, I mean. At the coffee house," he explained, with an odd blinking gesture that might've been a wink. "I'm a regular there, myself."

"No," she said quickly.

Not only was tomorrow her day off—half of which she planned to spend sleeping—there was no way she was going back to that coffee house. Not while he was there to play the role of spectator, wondering what daft thing she would do next.

"Oh."

The utterly crestfallen tone of his voice had her blinking up at him in surprise.

"I...uh..." he coughed, looking down at his feet. "I was hoping I might see ye again."

"It's just that I'm not working tomorrow," she explained before she could stop herself. "I'm planning on sleeping in."

Those full, red lips curled across his face in a shy, hopeful smile that nearly stopped the heart in her chest.

"Aye?" He said encouragingly.

Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it, do not do it Beauchamp!
"But I am working on Monday," she squeaked, wondering what on earth had happened to her self control.

The smile grew wider. "Monday as in Monday—or Monday as in Wednesday?"

She swatted at him with an annoyed scoff, though she couldn't stop the corners of her mouth from turning up slightly in a playful smile of her own. He was regarding her with a faint sort of fondness that made her think he maybe didn’t see her as just some crazy idiot from his local coffee house.

"Och I'm only teasin'," he assured her, pressing the slightest bit closer. "So Monday? Say...7:15?"

The words came up unbidden, before she could stop them. "It's a date."

******

Jamie berated himself the entire way home from the pub. He hadn’t been prepared to see her there, and all restraint vanished the instant her cheeks flooded with the sweet red flush that was quickly becoming his favorite thing in the world. He tried not to think of how much he liked how small she was, how he could envelop her with his body, keep her protected and safe in his embrace.

*Just enjoy being around her while you can,* he’d told himself. *Don’t talk to her, just be near her. Breathe the same air. You’re not gonna seek her out after this. Just don’t talk to her.*

But then he drank too much, hoping that the alcohol in his veins would somehow mask over that draw he felt, that constant pull to be near her. But it didn’t. And, as the evening progressed, that voice in his head changed its tune into—*Okay, so maybe talk to her. Just for a minute. But keep your distance. Don’t touch her.*

But then he followed her to the bar, pressed himself up against her because he was weak and a little drunk and he couldn’t be near her and not touch her. His head felt fuzzy, the bratty set of her mouth doing things to him that it shouldn’t. He heard himself ask her for coffee, and the ensuing mess of disgust and frustration was quickly enveloped by elation when she said yes.

Suddenly, that swaying, bargaining voice in his head was back.

*Just be her friend,* it said. *That’s it, nothing more.*
And he really believed he could do it. Believed he could satisfy that fire burning in his chest with bits and pieces of her. But then, Monday morning came, and she tumbled into the coffee shop, all wild curls and flushed cheeks.

Jamie Fraser was a fucking goner.

*****

September 2004

Jamie wanted justice. Needed it with a ferocity that consumed him. Kept him from eating, sleeping. When the cops first interviewed him, they were confident.

“No’ to worry lad,” They’d told him, with a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “With yer eye witness testimony, we’ll have the bastard locked up in no time. Ye’ll see.”

But then it turned out that his father’s killer was a wealthy banker, rich enough apparently to pay his way out of what he’d done.

It was two days later, when Jamie accompanied his Mam to the station for an update, that they dropped the bomb.


“Well, he was carrying one that day ma’am,” the sergeant said, looking apologetic. “And I’m afraid this will make it a wee bit harder to secure a conviction. St. Germain is claiming it was self-defense.”

“Fucking coppers,” His mother had seethed in the car, catching Jamie off guard because his mother never cursed. Her skin had a grayish undertint, and there were shadows of sleeplessness under her eyes. Her unwashed red hair piled high on her head in a greasy bun. “Useless. Absolutely fucking useless.”

But Jamie, like the stupid, naive, fourteen year old he was, wasn’t worried. He’d been there, and no
matter how much money the bastard had, he couldn’t keep Jamie from testifying in court.

It didn’t take Viktor St. Germain long at all to prove just how little that mattered, as he hired the country’s best lawyers. He filed motion after motion, holding the trial up for nearly a year. St. Germain won on almost every single one. Even managed to have a blood alcohol test, taken when he crashed his car two miles down the road from where he stabbed Brian— one that said he was nearly three times the legal limit— discarded from evidence.

August 2005

“My father didn’t threaten him,” Jamie insisted, palms sweaty, brain swirling, trying to keep up.

“How do you know?” The lawyer asked. “You said you were in the car when the dispute took place.”

“I know what happened,” Jamie seethed.

“Alright, then can you tell us what was said during the exchange?”

“Objection,” Another lawyer chimed in, making Jamie’s head spin. “Calls for hearsay.”

“I’d hardly call it hearsay, your honor, given that the witness has already admitted that he was in the car, well out of ear shot.”

The judge considered for only a moment. “I’ll allow it,” He turned to Jamie. “Answer the question Lad.”

“I don’t— I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what?”

“I dinna ken what they said!”
“No further questions your honor.”

And the lawyer walked away. Jamie was stunned. He’d been waited a whole year to tell this story and he was going to fucking tell it.

“He ran us off the fucking road!” Jamie roared, rising to his feet. “My father was going the speed limit and—”

“Mr. Fraser!”

“This prick was drunk off his arse, couldn’t get around us and so he ran us off the road!”

“Counselor, control your witness!”

“And then when Da didn’t fall to his feet and kiss his ring, he stabbed him. That’s what fucking happened!”

“Mr. Fraser!” The judge roared, banging his gavel. “One more outburst and I’ll hold you in contempt. You’ve been dismissed, remove yourself from the witness stand.”
Okay, so here’s the sitch. Since chapters three and four are shorter and still contain a good bit of material from the original version of this story, I’m going to deviate from the posting schedule just a wee bit. Chapter three goes up today, chapter four tomorrow, and then on Wednesday we’ll pick up with chapter five and all new material from there on.

Note: Though some of the material is the same, the story is still completely different. Key elements have been changed. If you have any questions or if something doesn’t make sense let me know!

Before she knew it, mornings were the highlight of Claire’s day. Every morning, she arrived at Bleecker Street Brews at 7:15 on the dot, and every morning, her tall red headed police officer was waiting for her, nose buried in one of his John Grisham novels with two steaming cups waiting on the table in front of him. Whenever she came in, he always looked up immediately, his black framed reading glasses - the effect of which, when combined with his uniform, was downright sinful - perched low on his nose.

“Good Morning, Lass!” He’d always say.

“Good Morning, Officer!” She’d always say back, taking her seat across from him.

“One of these days, you’ll have to let me buy.” She’d quip, nodding at the coffee cups waiting between them.

And, like clockwork, he’d always ignore her, responding with- “What’s on the agenda today Nurse Claire?”

Before, she would have thought that no man could convince her that they were legitimately interested in her work as a nurse in the NICU, but Jamie had a knack for making her lose her sense of self-consciousness and dive head first into passionate ramblings about the job she loved.

In turn, she was absolutely fascinated by his day to day life as a London City police officer. From their short morning conversations, she learned that he joined up a little less than a year ago. He always got a little awkward, and fidgety somehow whenever she asked him why he wanted to become a cop, but she didn’t think anything of it.

As the days wore on, she became more and more besotted. She started rising early enough in the mornings to assemble her hair into a somewhat tame state. Even going as far to put on a little makeup, something she seldom did— at least on work days. Nothing too crazy, just a touch of mascara and a quick swipe of shimmering pink lip gloss.

A week into their burgeoning “relationship”--whatever it was-- she walked into the coffee shop with high spirits and cheeks flushed with cold. She bent down to tie her shoe, and was just standing back up, when she saw something that made her heart sink down to her stomach. She didn’t even notice her hospital id badge slipping out of her scrub pocket and clattering to the floor as she took in the
sight of Jamie sitting at their usual table with a blonde woman that she didn’t recognize.

She was different from Claire, more glamorous. Her clothes looked expensive and her fingers were perfectly manicured when they wrapped around what should have been Claire’s usual cappuccino. She couldn’t see Jamie’s face, but this strange woman was facing her and her eyes were glowing with flirtatious glee.

Feeling as though she’d been punched in the stomach, Claire turned and walked away, leaving her badge lying on the coffee shop floor.

*****

Jamie had always loved mornings. It was his favorite time a day. A time when he felt new, refreshed, capable of anything. But now, his mornings were spent with his palms sweaty at his sides and his heart pounding in his chest.

The twenty or thirty minutes he spent every morning with his sweet Sassenach nurse were the highlight of his days. She was everything he’d ever wanted in a woman, and everything else he’d been too daft to hope for. She was kind, and genuine, with a smile that made him giddy. Not to mention she had that playful, sort’ve contemptuous brattiness about her that went straight to his groin.

When he was with her, that part of him— the part that knew he was dangerous and bad and no good for her— always fell quiet. His entire being focused in on her, feeling her pull like gravity.

He woke up that morning, taking more time with his grooming than he normally would have. He fussed with his hair, checked his teeth four times for stray bits of food, and even used a few spritz of that ridiculous cologne Jenny had sent for his birthday. He immediately regretted it of course, fearing that he would smell like a magazine sample.

He reached the coffee shop at seven a.m. on the dot. He ordered his chai and her cappuccino and sat down at their usual table, counting down the minutes until 7:15.

When he realized someone was walking towards him, he looked up, already smiling- only to have the smile fall instantly from his face when he saw who it was.

“Hello Jamie.” She said, her French accent subtle but noticeable as she greeted him in that low, mocking tone that never failed to make his skin crawl.

His entire body tensed. “You’re a bit far from home.”

She smirked, taking the seat across from him. “As are you.”

She reached out, scrawny pale hand closing on Claire’s cappuccino when he snatched it away. “That’s not for you.”

“Who’s it for, then?” She asked, her long, blood red nails tapping against the table top. “Making friends here in London are you?”

“That’s none of your business.” He bit back, fighting the swell of panic at the knowledge that Claire would be there any minute. “What are you doing here, Annalise?”

She shrugged. “Your Uncle sent me to check in on you. He misses you.”

He huffed a bitter laugh. “Misses me, huh?”
“Is that so terrible?” She asked, the French accent thickening as she rolled her R’s.

“Look, just stay away from me, aye?” He hissed. “I don’t want anything to do with you, or my uncle, or the business. I’m done.”

She laughed, leaning back in her seat, smirking at him.

“Something funny?” He asked.

“You’re acting as though I don’t know you at all.” She sneered. “What happened to that fifteen year old kid I knew, hmm? The one that showed up at his Uncle’s doorstep, ready to set the whole world on fire?”

“You don’t know me.” He said low and grating, barely above a whisper.

Again she laughed. “Mackenzie blood runs in those veins, Jamie. You were born for power. Do you really think this life will be enough for you? As some nameless, faceless, nobody cop in a city where no one knows your name?”

She tilted her head to one side, challenging him through narrowed eyes. “What would your Mother say?”

He stood up, suddenly, violently, nearly knocking his chair over in the process.

“Get away from me.” He commanded, dark and dangerous. “If I see you again, I swear to god I’ll arrest you on the spot.”

With a sly smile, she stood, flipping her dark blonde hair over her shoulder as she walked away. It took several minutes for Jamie to calm himself down enough to realize that it was almost 7:30 and Claire still wasn’t there.

Must be running late, he thought.

It wasn’t until almost 8 that he’d resigned himself to the truth, that she wasn’t coming. Probably for the best, he thought, though he couldn’t help the dejected hang of his head as he stood up to leave.

He was walking out the door, when a shiny glint of white on the floor caught his eye.

He stared down at the ID badge in his hand, Claire’s bonny face smiling back up at him. Was she here? Why did she leave? He wondered, before reminding himself that it didn’t matter. That she wasn’t here anymore and that was a good thing. Really. He’d known it was too good to be true. That he was daft to think that the Universe could’ve sent him someone like her, knowing what he’d done.

He said goodbye to her in his heart, hoping with all his might that she would make a happy life for herself. Even though it killed him, more than a little, knowing he wouldn’t be a part of it.

He clasped the badge in his hand, before slipping it into his back-pocket, thankful he had a small piece of her to keep for himself. A token to remind him of those brief few days where his life was nowhere near as lonely and miserable as it should have been.

*******

October 2005

Hate is a powerful thing. It drives us down to our absolute lowest, makes us do things we wouldn’t otherwise consider. It was hate that kept Jamie up every night after that joke of a trial finally ended. It was hate that first planted the seed in his head, that if the system he was supposed to count on
couldn’t deliver justice, maybe he could. With a little help.

It wasn’t an easy thing for a fifteen year old to do, getting from Scotland to Paris on his own but he was desperate and he managed. Told his Mam he was going to visit his cousin Jared, who was studying at the University there. It wasn’t a complete lie, but a wee visit with his cousin was not the motivation for the trip. Not that his Mam noticed much of anything. She was a zombie these days, as if the outcome of the trial had taken her will to live.

After school, he caught the first bus into Inverness. From there, a train to Glasgow. Boarded the seven fifteen flight to Paris and arrived at Jared’s flat later that night. Not wanting to wait until the next morning, he merely dropped off his duffle bag, before setting back off into the city.

He got out of the cab, looking down at the address on the scrap of paper in his hand. A glance back up at the luxurious Parisian apartment building, and he knew he had the right place. He road the elevator all the way to the penthouse, wringing his hands.

He was lead into a dark study, where a man in an expensive looking suit sat waiting for him. The air was thick and heavy with cigar smoke. Colum sneered over the rim of his glass, sipping whisky while Jamie stood before him. Jamie chastised himself for not bothering to change out of his school uniform before he went to the airport, wanting more than anything to feel like a man just then.

“I’m surprised your Mother told you about me.” He mused. “She didn’t seem to have much interest in the family or the business, once she ran off and married your father.”

Jamie didn’t know what to say to that, looked down at his feet. His trainers looked cheap and dirty compared to Column’s polished leather loafers.

“Mam didna tell me.” He whispered. “People around town talk about ye. Say that ye kill people. That yer dangerous.”

Colum arched a brow. “Oh? Then why are you here?”

He hesitated, cleared his throat.

“Ye ken what happened to my Da?”

“Aye. Shame, that. Heard the bastard got off too.”

Jamie nodded, knowing what he wanted, but also knowing that he’d never be able to ask. Never be able to get the words out because they were horrible and vile and he shouldn’t have even been there in the first place.

“Heard his lawyers tore ye apart on the stand.”

He looked down, cheeks burning with shame at the memory of how he’d failed.

“Aye.”

Colum considered him for a long time. “What do ye want lad?”

“Justice.” Jamie said simply.

“What’ll ye give me then? If I do what ye’ve come here to ask me to do.”

“Anything. Everything.”
"999, What's Your Emergency?"

Chapter Notes

As promised, here is chapter four. I know it’s short but chapter five will be up tomorrow! And then on Friday, we’ll have chapter six which (imo) is where the plot really gets going. Normally I won’t be posting chapters on Tuesdays, but I thought it would be good to get through the setting up stage and into the core plot of the story.

A week or so after her disappointing non-meeting with Jamie at the coffee house, Claire discovered that there was, in fact a fate worse than death.

"I don’t know if I’ve mentioned this yet, but my book on Bonnie Prince Charlie's Alliance with the Highland Clans received widespread critical acclaim." Frank droned on, apparently unbothered by the fact that Claire had not spoken in roughly 20 minutes.

"You did mention it actually." Seven times.

Frank was a Historian working at the London Museum of Natural History. Technically, she’d known him for years. He’d been a friend of her Uncle Lamb’s and started seeking her out almost immediately. He claimed that his intentions went no further than ensuring her welfare for the sake of an old friend, but she had a feeling it went a bit further than that.

He’d shown up at her flat earlier that evening, asking to take her out to dinner. Put on the spot and unable to come up with a good excuse, she had no choice but to say yes. After dinner, he insisted on walking her home. They were just ascending the stairs of her flat, Claire's face buried in her bag as she dug for her keys.

"Have you ever been to the Historical Society of London Annual Awards Gala?" He asked as they arrived at her floor.

"Oh, well." She snorted. "It's always on the same night as the BAFTAs, and they serve better food, so..."

She smiled a little, pleased with her joke, turning a glance up at Frank to see that he looked genuinely concerned as they came to a stop in front of her door--her attempt at sarcasm having gone completely over his head.

"Oh?" He pursed his lips. "Do you know if the dates conflict again this year? Because I was actually hoping you could accompany me."

It was then that Claire's attention zeroed in on the door to her flat, which was at the moment, slightly ajar.

*****

“999, what’s your emergency?”

“Yes, hi, I’d like to report a break-in?” Claire mumbled into the phone, tiptoeing through her flat, skin crawling with the knowledge that a stranger had been in her home.
She prattled of her information, including her address. She was just hanging up when--

“I don’t think they took anything from your jewelry box.” Frank informed her seriously as he joined her in the sitting room.

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. Her “jewelry box” was a small wooden thing she kept on her dresser containing exactly two sets of fake pearl earrings and a broken silver necklace chain. She didn’t wear much jewelry-- mostly because when she did, she tended to fidget with it incessantly. A habit her Uncle had always scolded her for as unmannerly. She kept all of her special items-- such as her parents’ wedding bands--in a safety deposit box at the bank.

“Good, thanks for checking.” She mumbled.

“Did you call the police?” He asked.

No. She wanted to respond. I figured we’d crack this one on our own, Scooby Doo style. What d’ya say Frank?

Instead she only smiled. “I did. They should be here—”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. “London City Police.” Came the low Scottish burr from the other side.

Claire froze at the sound of that voice. No. She told herself. It couldn’t be.

She hadn’t seen Jamie since that last morning at the coffee house. A place she now avoided like the plague, along with World’s End.

Swallowing hard, she walked over and opened the door.

No, no, no, no! She screamed inwardly as she stared up into a pair of equally stunned blue eyes.

“Sassenach?”

Sassenach. Englishwoman. The nickname he sometimes called her. Her heart clenched a bit at the endearment before she chased the feeling away.

“Hi Jamie.” She said, smiling weakly, as she stepped aside, allowing him entrance into the flat.

“Officer, thank god you’re here.” Frank announced striding over as though he were directing a major crime scene.

“Who’s this then?” Jamie asked, quirking a brow in Claire’s direction as he shook Frank’s hand.

“Oh-um—” She sputtered.

“Frank Randall.” Frank said, shaking Jamie’s hand firmly before releasing it. “I was just escorting Claire home from our dinner date this evening when we discovered what’d happened.”

Jamie’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline at that, but his face revealed nothing.

“I wouldn’t call it a date.” She rushed to amend, caught off guard by Frank’s characterization. “He’s an old friend of my Uncle’s.”

A long silence passed between the three of them before Jamie finally cleared his throat. “I dinna ken
if yer aware, but there’s been a string of break-ins lately in this neighborhood. I’d advise ye to always lock yer door in the future.”

Claire knitted her brow as she shot a glance at her front door. “What do you mean?”

“No sign of forced entry.” He explained, hand reaching back to tap at the door knob. “Door was unlocked when the suspect broke in.”

She immediately shot an exasperated glare in Frank’s direction. When they’d left for dinner that evening, Frank had realized at the bottom of the stairs that he’d left his sunglasses in her flat. Not wanting to trudge back up the stairs herself, she gave him her keys, reminding him to lock the door back when he was finished.

“I thought you said you locked the door back?”

“I thought I did…” Frank said, frowning as he scratched the back of his head.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Claire exhaled deeply. “It’s late Frank. Why don’t you go home? I can deal with this.”

“Oh.” Frank said, looking surprised. “Alright then. Are you sure?”

Claire did her best to smile at him. “Yes. Thank you for dinner.”

“Of course, darling.” He crooned, coming into kiss her on the cheek, making Claire step back, offering him a handshake instead.

Once Frank was gone, Claire lead Jamie through the flat listing off her stolen items.

A couple hundred dollars worth of cash she’d kept stored in a jar on top of the fridge, her laptop, a blu-ray dvd player and an iPad left in the flat by her friend and fellow nurse Joe Abernathy.

“What about Louise?” Jamie asked, jarring her for a second before she remembered that of course, he knew that Louise lived here too.

“She’s out of town, as usual. I’ve made a list of what I think is missing.” She explained, looking everywhere but at him. “She’ll check again when she gets back on Monday.”

Throughout the entire ordeal, Jamie was perfectly professional, acting as though they were perfect strangers, a fact that irritated her to the absolute extreme.

“I think I have everything I need.” He said, looking down at the notepad in his hand, as he began to turn towards the door. “I’ll get the paperwork started down at the station, and someone will be in touch—”

“Seriously?” She blurted, furious at his indifference.

He quirked a brow at her. “What?”

She laughed, a rough, exasperated sound. “Are you really just going to act like we don’t even know each other?”

“What do you mean?” He asked, brows knitted together.

“Nevermind.” She scoffed. “Have a good night, Jamie.”
As she turned away from him, he caught her by the forearm.

“Ye’re the one who blew me off, Claire.” He said, his voice taking on a bit more of an edge.

“Actually, I didn’t blow you off.” She told him, wriggling out of his grip. “I’ll have you know- I did show up that morning.”

She folded her arms defensively. “And you didn’t seem to be hurting for company.”

His face contorted in confusion. “What the devil are ye talking about?”

“I saw you with that woman, Jamie.” She said clapping her palms together for emphasis. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong idea, but I’m not interested in being just another one of your conquests.”

“Conquests?” His frown deepened. “Claire, what are ye talking about? What woman?”

“The woman you were with!” She hissed, pointing towards the door at no one in particular. “The posh blonde in the fancy clothes. Ring any bells?”

“Wha-?” She saw when the realization crashed over his face. “Claire, ye dinna—“

“It’s fine Jamie.” She spat, knowing full well the hurt and anger she felt was showing clearly on her face. “You don’t know owe me anything. I’m nothing to you.”

If she’d been looking at him, she would have see the shadow descend over his face at her words. Would have see the change in his eyes as they narrowed on her, almost predator like as he stalked towards her, one step at a time.

At his approach, she turned her back to him, not wanting to let him see his effect on her. She could almost feel the burning of his stare on her. Hot and raging and burning. And despite herself, she relished in it. Wishing she could tattoo the feeling into her flesh.

“Nothin’ to me, are ye?” He whispered in her ear. So close, she could feel the heat of him ghosting against her back. So close, but not quite touching. Her breath hitched as she fought the urge to lean back into him.

“Christ, do ye no’ ken…” He growled, dropping his head until his lips ghosted over the spot where neck curved into back. “How fuckin’ crazy ye—“

A crackling in the radio mounted on his shoulder made them jump apart. After a moment, Jamie cleared his throat.

“I should go…” He trailed off.

They were facing one another now, both so clearly eager to bridge the gap between them, but neither of them brave enough to take the first step.

“Before I forget—” Jamie said, digging a hand into his pocket. “Ye left this.”

She looked down to see him pressing her lost ID Badge into her hand. With a huge, shuddering, exhale of breath, Jamie went to the door.

With his hand on the door knob, he paused, looking over his shoulder. “Goodbye, Claire.”
Okay so now this is pretty much entirely new content. Chapter six will be up on Friday!

The day after her encounter with Jamie, Claire was working at the nurse’s station, trying and failing to focus on paperwork. And yet, all she could think of was the heat of Jamie’s body when he stood behind her so close but never touching. She found herself going nearly mad wondering what it would feel like if he did touch her.

At some point, she became aware of someone trying to get her attention.

“Incoming, incoming, incoming!” Geillis murmured to Claire as she whirled past her down the hall, with a tall red-headed Scot hot on her heels.

“Jamie,” she said, a little breathless.

He smiled at her sheepishly, hands coming out from behind his back to reveal that he brought with him both a hazelnut cappuccino and a raspberry tart. She was momentarily taken aback to realize that he’d remembered her usual order at the coffee house.

“Good Morning, Sassenach,” he breathed, coming to stand in front of her at the nurse’s station. “I hope this isn’t a bad time.”

Shaking her head, she flipped close her binder of paperwork. “What’s up?”

“I came to apologize for my behavior the other night,” he began, handing her the treats. “It was verra unprofessional of me, and I’m sorry.”

Her cheeks burned as she restrained the instinct to tell him that the words he’d spoken to her that night haunted her dreams and could rouse her in an instant, whenever they sprang up from the surface of her memories.
“And,” he went on. “To offer ye an explanation. The woman ye saw me with that morning … well, it’s complicated. But she’s no’ a girlfriend or anything. Not even a friend, really.”

She arched a brow at him, as though waiting for him to go on.

“She’s…” he sighed, heavily, running a hand through his hair. “She works for my Uncle.”

“Oh,” Claire said dumbly, caught off guard.

“I’ve known her a long time. It was a chance meeting, nothing more.” There was a certain tightness to the set of his lips as he went on. “We only talked for a few minutes, and then she left.”

Claire looked down at her feet, feeling damnably foolish. “I see…”

He hesitated before speaking again. “I canna tell you how much I’ve missed seein’ ye every day.”

Her heart fluttered at that, and she looked back up at him, hope renewed.

“I was hoping we could start over.”

She was opening her mouth, ready to respond with an emphatic yes when he spoke again.

“As friends.”

She clamped her mouth shut tight, trying to maintain some semblance of a smile. Not trusting herself to speak, she merely nodded.

“Tomorrow then, Sassenach?” He asked, full red lips quirked up in a crooked smile.
*Something is better than nothing,* she thought to herself.

“Tomorrow.”

***********

*Four weeks later…*

Glancing up to ensure she wouldn’t be caught, she looked down at her cell phone screen. She had one new message.

*Geillis Duncan: How’s the day off?*

Claire paused, looking up again to ensure that her companion’s attention was still occupied, before responding.

*Claire Beauchamp: Brilliant! Yours?*

*Geillis Duncan: I’ve no complaints. Abernathy and I will probably hit the pub around 8. Care to join?*

Before Claire could formulate a response, her attention was redirected by a sharp Scottish rebuke.

“Sassenach!” Jamie grumbled from the other side of the sofa, remote still pointing at the tv as he pressed pause.

“What!” She pouted. “I’m paying attention.”

Soon after their reconciliation, Jamie and Claire came to the discovery that neither of them had ever seen Game of Thrones. Given that this sort of negligence was practically a mortal sin in the UK, they decided they would journey on the path to redemption together.
“Ye ken the rules!” He pointed out. “Hand it over.”

They’d made a pact to stay off their phones while watching the show. They were towards the end of the second season now, and this was the first time either one of them had slipped up. She stared him down, reluctant to give in at first. He met her unflinching, a small smirk playing at his lips as he held out his hand.

“Fine.” She huffed. “Just let me respond to Geillis.”

In the interim, Geillis had sent her another message.

*Geillis Duncan: Go ahead and ask the Wee Fox Cub too. ;)*

Claire bit her lip, trying to fight off a smile. In the past month, she and Jamie had become somewhat inseparable. In addition to their reinstated daily meetings at Bleecker Street Brews, they spent practically all their free time together. Something that amused their friends infinitely.

“Something funny, Sassenach?”

Claire looked up, shaking off her thoughts. “Geillis wants to know if we want to join them at the pub tonight.”

“Oh aye?” He asked, quirking up his eyebrows. “D’ye want to go?”

Claire blushed, looking away. While she loved her friends dearly, this was the first she’d had time alone with Jamie in over a week. And though she’d never admit it out loud, she missed him. A lot.

“I dunno…” She trailed off with a cough. “Do you?”

He bit his lip on a crooked smile, nearly making her heart stop. “No.”

She let her enthusiastic agreement shine on her face as she looked down to respond to Geillis.
She had just enough time to see Geillis respond with about 20 iterations of the eggplant emoji before Jamie stretched his hand out towards her again.

“Hand it over, Sassenach.”

She obliged, coming up to her knees and stretching her arm out to drop it into his hand. For some unspoken reason, they always sat as far away from each other as possible. For Claire, it was mostly because physical contact with Jamie, inadvertent or otherwise, tended to have an unsettling effect on her. Made her want to lie on top of him, stretch herself out over the long, hard frame of his body. As for his reasoning, she couldn’t say.

“When exactly did ye stop paying attention?” He asked as she flopped back down on her side of the couch.

“I didn’t stop paying attention.” She corrected. “I only looked away for a moment at the most.”

He considered her with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. “I’ll rewind it a few minutes just in case.”

Try as she might, she couldn’t seem to get into the episode. She was restless somehow, overly aware of Jamie’s presence on the far end of her sofa. She couldn’t explain the sudden urge she felt to irritate him. But she knew exactly how to achieve it.

“Who’s that again?” She asked a few minutes later, squinting at the TV.

She didn’t look at him, needing to hide her face. Jamie hated when she asked questions during an episode of television or a movie. In response, she got exactly what she wanted. A pointed, sidelong glance and a huff as he raised the remote once more to pause.

“That’s Jon Snow, Sassenach.” He informed her with a roll of his eyes. “Surely ye recall.”
She frowned in false confusion. “Really? I don’t think I’ve seen him before.”

The tone of her voice was lilting, far too playful to be taken seriously. He snapped his head fully towards her now, eyes narrowing and lips curling upwards as he caught on. In a series of quick movements, he dropped a hand down into the popcorn bowl on the coffee table in front of him, before bringing his hand back up and flinging a tiny handful kernels at her head.

“Are you serious?” She laughed, gapping at him.

His face was blank and he didn’t respond as he once again drove his hand into the bowl of popcorn and-

“Stop!!” She half roared, half giggled, as she dodged the onslaught.

A few moments later, she turned away from him, facing the tv with folded arms, crossed legs, and pursed lips.

“Do you mind?” She demanded primly, in her most proper English accent. “I am trying to watch television.”

The next few seconds were a blur as she was tugged down by her shirt collar and forced onto her back on the couch. Jamie’s face appeared above her--upside down from her perspective-- hands braced on either side of her head.

“Ye’re such a brat.” He laughed, shaking his head. “D’ye ken that?”

She glowered up at him. “I am not.”

His eyes darkened as they zeroed in on her mouth. Lowering himself down, he rested his weight on a forearm, until their faces were only inches apart.

“Look at that pout.” He murmured, bringing a hand up to her face.
He traced her protruding lower lip with his forefinger, softly at first, applying a bit more pressure on his second swipe. She gasped, arching upward involuntarily when--

Without warning, he moved away quickly, scrubbing hands through his hair. Sitting up, she saw that Jamie had moved to sit even further away from her, practically sitting on the arm of the couch. Clearing his throat, he raised the remote again and pressed play.

Claire stared at the TV without seeing, all of her energy focused on not crying out in frustration. There’d been countless moments between them, when she thought--was almost sure -- that he wanted her as much as she did him. And then, every time, he would pull away from her again, becoming aloof and unreadable.

*****

A few blocks away at World’s End, Joe and Geillis were huddled around a high-top table, waiting for the waitress to return with their first round.

“Where’s Claire?” Joe asked, taking a fistful of peanuts from the basket on the table and tossing them into his mouth.

“Not coming.” Geillis told him, waggling her brows suggestively. “She’s holed up with the wee fox cub again.”

“Fraser?” He frowned. “Again?”

She nodded, smile falling away when she saw the concerned look on Joe’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s nothing…” He trailed off. “Are they a thing? Her and Jamie?”

“I dinna ken.” She shrugged. “But they do spend an awful lot of time together. Why?”

“No reason.” He mumbled, picking at a nick in the worn, wooden table top.
“No.” He snorted, rolling his eyes. “Not that I—I mean Claire’s great and all, but I don’t see her like that.”

“What is it then?” She pressed. “Clearly yer bothered that she’s spending time with Jamie.”

“I wouldn’t say bothered…” He sighed. “It’s just… Rupert used to talk about Jamie a lot back at Uni.”

“And?”

“And…” He shrugged. “It always sounded to me like he was involved with a… rough crowd.”

Geillis frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know… Rupert was always pretty vague.” He admitted, scratching his jaw absently. “But he’s a cop now, right? So, I mean… you know? Can’t be that bad.”


They passed a few minutes in contemplative silence, until--

“Do you think I should say something?” He asked. “To Claire?”

Geillis bit her lip, considering. “Nah. Ye shouldna get involved. Jamie seems like a good man. And Claire’s absolutely mad over him, so I dinna think she’d believe ye even if ye told her.”

“Yeah…” He agreed, haltingly. “You’re probably right.”
The Masked Man

It was a sunny, crisp fall Friday and Claire was in a remarkably good mood. She hummed to herself quietly as she clicked through her charts on the computer at the nurses station. Her limbs were loose and her mind was light. She had a solid day’s work behind her and was only twenty minutes away from clocking out into two days off.

As the seconds inched closer to 11 pm, she could almost hear the outside world calling her name.

Just as she finished, Dr. Hildegard, department head of the NICU, rounded the corner.

“Claire, can you do me a favor before you clock out?”

“Yes, of course.” She picked up her stethoscope, which she’d put down on the nurses station, and draped it about her neck.

Dr. Hildegard held up a thickly padded manilla envelope. “We got the pharmacy’s mail again. Would you mind running it down?”

“No problem.” She said, taking the envelope.

The hospital pharmacy was on the third floor, in an isolated, quiet wing of the building. Late as it was, there wasn’t anyone around. She assumed the on call staff was on break. Slipping behind the administration desk, she plopped the envelope down and turned to go.

She yelped, realizing she wasn’t alone. He was tall, and well built, wearing a hat, sunglasses and black hoodie zipped up to his neck. A red handkerchief covered the lower half of his face.

“Who are you?” She asked, taking an instinctive step back. “What are you doing here?”

He burst forward, grabbing her by the neck of her scrubs. She felt the press of cool steel against her chin, knew without looking that it was the barrel of a gun.
“Don’t scream.” He demanded in a menacing Irish accent. “Don’t make a sound—I swear I’ll blow your fuckin’ head off.”

Her mouth went dry, eyes darting from either side of the department, ears yearning for approaching footsteps. “Wh-what do you want?

He rolled his eyes, and jutted his chin at the store room behind her. Claire’s eyes widened when she realized what he wanted. She knew she couldn’t give it to him. The pharmacy stores were kept locked away, key card access only. As a newly hired nurse from the NICU, Claire’s ID badge would be useless.

Her mind scattered out into a million different directions, eyes darting around the room looking for something, any means of escape. She turned her head a little, did a quick scan of the desk behind her, looking for something hard enough to hit him with. Felt the weight of phone in her pocket, wondered if there was a way she could distract him just enough for just a second, long enough to dial.

Without warning, the man thrust a black duffle bag into her hands.

“Oxycontin. Vicodin. Fill up the bag.”

“I don’t--I don’t--” She sputtered.

“Now!” He roared, shoving her towards the door.

“I don’t work in this department!” She told him, trying to stave off panic. “I-I don’t know how to open--”

He grabbed her, gripped her hard by the scruff of the neck.

“Look at me. Look at my fucking face. Do I look like I have time for this shite?”

“I don’t know how to open the-- my badge won’t work for--”
He growled in frustration before ripping at the badge that hung on a lanyard at her hip. He pushed her down into one of the office chairs. To Claire’s astonishment, he produced a pair of handcuffs from his back pocket.

He fastened one of the metal bracelets around her wrist, the other on to the handle of a nearby file cabinet, before setting off with her badge. She winced in fear when, as she suspected, her badge failed to grant him entry.

“Fuck!” She heard him roar. There came a series of resounding thumps, what she assumed was the sound of his fist pounding in to the wall.

He appeared before her again, the bit of his cheeks she could see flaming red with anger.

“What did you do to it?” He demanded, shaking the useless card in her face.

“Nothing!” She swore. “I don’t even work--”

They both froze as the sound of approaching footsteps filled the air around them. He threw her phone on the desk, out of her reach and muttered a bitten out shit under his breath. He looked down at her badge and then back up at her.

“Claire Beauchamp, huh?” He said, leaning down to remove the handcuffs, pressing his face close to hers. “This isn’t over.”

He dropped the badge on the floor next to her and took off down the hall.

*****

“Something wrong, Fraser?”

Jamie jumped, taken a bit by surprise, looking up from his phone at his colleagues across the table. At the end of his shift at 10, he’d agreed to go for drinks with a few other officers. It was a pub by
the station, grungy and dark and littered with cops.

“Och, nothing.” He mumbled, looking back down at his phone.

Claire always texted him at the end of her later shifts, letting him know when she was leaving and then when she got home safely. Something he’d requested so many times she’d started doing it automatically. He didn’t want to be overbearing but he hated the idea of her walking alone at night. The city was dangerous, a fact that Jamie was painfully familiar with.

He tried not to worry, resisted the urge to text her, to call her again. He was, after all, just her friend. It wasn’t what he wanted, but it was the only thing he would let himself be to her. And for the most part, he was managing it. He promised himself that he just wouldn’t touch her, he wouldn’t get too close. That he would keep the boundary between them so firmly defined in his mind that he would never be tempted to breach it. Convinced himself that it was enough, just to be in her life. That it was far more than he fucking deserved.

“What’d I tell ye?” Murtagh elbowed one of the other officers. “The puir lad is done for.”

Jamie scowled, cheeks burning as he tucked his phone back into his pocket. His worry for Claire hadn’t put him in the proper mood for drinks at the pub.

“What are ye on about now, ye auld coot?” He grumbled into his beer.

“Ye and yer wee lassie.” Murtagh sneered, waggling his bushy black eyebrows.

“She’s no’ my--”

Jamie stopped, something crackling in the radio mounted on his shoulder that made his blood run cold.

“Wait, what was that?” He turned his ear down towards the receiver.

_Active officers in Kensington 7A6, I repeat we have a code two at Trinity Hospital. One witness, female, mid-twenties. Suspect is armed, dangerous and still at large._
The next thing he was aware of was the sound of his feet crashing against the pavement as he tore a path towards the hospital. He knew it was her, felt the sick pounding of the heart in his chest, aching with certainty. He was causing a scene, the sight of a uniformed police officer running at full speed through the street was enough to make more than one passerby stop and stare. He didn’t care. He bulldozed through the crowds of people, checking into shoulders and earning a fair number of disgruntled shouts in his wake.

At the hospital, he was directed to the office of the lead hospital administrator. Bursting the door open, he was greeted with the sight of Claire sitting at the chair behind the desk, sipping water from a small paper cup while a tall, older woman stroked her hair soothingly.

“So Christ.” He gasped, bending over, bracing his hands on his knees, heaving air into his lungs.

The responding officers turned on him, notepads still in hand, having clearly been in the middle of taking Claire’s statement.

“Fraser?” said one of the men--Jamie realized it was Jeremy Foster, another rookie from his precinct. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard…” He sputtered, still trying to catch his breath. “On the radio…”

“We signaled back that we were responding.” Foster cocked his head to one side. “Didn’t you go off duty a few hours ago?”

“Aye, but, I ken her.” He explained. “She’s my…”

He shook his head, not trusting himself to finish that sentence in his current state of mind. Side stepping the officers, he moved over to Claire, crouching down in front of her.

“Christ, Lass.” He said, reaching up to brush a few errant curls out of her face. “Are ye alright?”

She looked down at him wide-eyed, as though she didn’t believe he was really there. Slowly, she began to nod.
“Yes. I think so. I’m--” She broke off, teeth sinking into her lower lip.

“What’s that?” He prodded, cupping a hand at her face, letting his thumb stroke across her cheek.

That seemed to crack some sort of resolve in her as she let out a single, shuddering whimper.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” She told him. A single tear slipped out of her eye, breaking his heart in two.


She broke down in tears then, throwing her arms around his neck and tucking her face into the curve of his shoulder. Without a moment’s hesitation, Jamie stood, hauled her up into his arms, and settled back into the chair with her cradled in his lap.

Foster and his partner were watching the scene with brows raised to hairlines. Jamie knew he’d get a lifetime’s worth of grief for this back at the station, but he couldn’t find it in him to care.

“Do ye need anything else from her then?” He asked, running a hand up her back. “I’d like to get her home.”

“We’ve taken her statement.” Foster said. “But I think there might be cause to worry for her safety going forward.”

Jamie stiffened. “Why?”

The other officer tapped his notepad with the eraser of his pencil. “From what she’s told us, it sounds like this was the same guy that’s been holding up hospitals and pharmacies all over the East End. We know almost nothing about him, other than he’s violent. Ruthless.”

Foster paused, mouth quirking as he looked down at his notes. “And based on the nature of their encounter, I think we should err on the side of caution.”
He angled his head down, directing his gaze at Claire. “Do you have a safe place to stay, ma’am?”

Claire sniffed, pushing up off Jamie’s chest. “Well-

“Aye.” Jamie said with finality, curving a hand around her hip, drawing her closer. “She’ll be staying with me.”
Inches

In the almost whole year that he’d lived there, Jamie hadn’t had a single person over to his flat. He’d only ever been alone here. And so now, standing in his kitchen, it was surprisingly disconcerting listening to his shower run, knowing he wasn’t in it.

The thought of who was in it, nearly driving him mad. His mind flooded with visions of Claire standing under the steaming hot water, her smooth, perfect skin all pinked and dripping.

His phone rang, ripping him from his thoughts.

“Hello?” He said into the receiver, pushing the heel of his hand against his closed eye, as though he could erase the images from his brain.

“Foster just filled me in.” Murtagh’s rough voice came rumbling over the line. “Said ye brought the witness back to yer place?”

“Aye. Claire’s here with me,” he said, leaning forward on the kitchen island, chin resting on his palm.

“Claire?” Came the shocked reply. “The lassie ye’ve been moonin’ over for months?”

Jamie’s spine snapped straight as he looked over towards the bathroom, as if there was somehow a chance that Claire could’ve overheard the comment.

“I’ve no’ been— we’re— she’s—,” he scrubbed a hand through his hair, taking a breath. “We’re friends.”

The answering grunt sounded none too convinced. “As ye say. How is she?”

“She’s shaken, but she’s alright,” he couldn’t help but smile. “Already fightin’ me about going back to work on Monday.”
Murtagh chuckled. “Sounds like a braw lass.”

The smile on Jamie’s face widened, spreading into something almost dopey and hopelessly fond. “She is.”

“I was reading over Foster’s notes and it seems like her account of the attack is almost… disjointed somehow.”

“I think she’s still in a wee bit o’ shock. I’m sure she’ll be able to remember more in a few days.”

“Aye, well, in any case,” Murtagh went on. “Based on what she was able to recall, this guy doesn’t sound like someone I want to underestimate.”

Jamie hummed his agreement, attention briefly diverted towards the bathroom by the sound of the water turning off.

“Ye should probably keep her there with ye until we know more.” Murtagh chuckled. “Not that ye’ll mind much, I’m sure.”

Jamie rolled his eyes. “Was there anything else?”

“Oh, uhm, yes actually.” He said, sobering substantially. “Look, Jamie, just so we’re clear, yer not gettin’ anywhere near this case.”

“What?” His hand gripped at the counter edge. “Murtagh, ye canna—”

“As I’ve told ye a hundred times before, it’s ‘Captain’ or ‘Sir’ if we’re at the station, or discussing police business.” The burly old Scot grumbled back, voice low and stern. “Ye ken that I love ye like a son, but when it comes to work, the roles need to be clear. Do ye understand?”


“I think ye’ll find that I can.” Came the terse reply. “Whether ye want to be honest about it or no’, I
ken ye. I’ve got two eyes, and my brain works pretty good too. Yer too close to the case, Lad.”

“It’s no’ like— we’re not— I’m no’ too close!” He grasped for the right words to explain. “I dinna ken what yer thinkin’, but—”

“What I’m thinkin’?” Murtagh laughed. “Well let’s look at the evidence, aye? For ten months, ye didna have a life outside the station walls. Picking up shifts left and right, signing up for extra training. And then, one day, I start catching ye slackin’ on paper work, grinna down at yer cell phone all the livelong day. Ye start begging off early, asking to get switched to different shifts. And I dinna even ken the last time ye’ve been around the flat for dinner. Suzette’s convinced ye’ve been shot or somethin’ and I’m just no’ tellin’ her.”

Jamie listened helplessly, unable to come up with a response, tensing when he heard Claire moving around in the bathroom.

“And so finally, I ask ye what’s been going on with ye. After a wee interrogation ye cave, and tell me about this lass ye met in a coffee shop. Ye tell me it’s—”

*Jamie could practically hear the air quotes through the phone*

—‘no’ like that’ and that yer ‘just friends’, but then ye spend every second of yer free time with her, watching that bloody dragon zombie show when we *both* ken ye’ve seen all the way through it five or six times. And then, at the mere suggestion that she could be in trouble, ye set off like a loon through the streets, all but causing a public disturbance. I mean, Christ, man!”

He laughed, exasperated. “Ye’ve got her in yer flat. I’ve never even been to yer flat.”

“Ye’ve never asked to come by.” Jamie interjected, relieved to have a point he could argue on.

“Aye, well, ye’ve never invited me.” He countered easily. “And that’s not the point. Look— do ye wanna hear what I’m thinkin’?”

“Not really.”
“I’m thinkin’—” A deep breath. “I’m thinkin’ that lass has become yer entire world. I’m thinkin’ ye’d break laws for her, kill for her. Ye’d certainly forsake yer oath as an officer of the law and that, my lad, is the textbook definition of too goddamn close.”

Jamie swallowed, having absolutely nothing to say. The old man was right, after all.

“So. Yer not to touch this fuckin’ case. Are we clear?”

“Aye Sir.”

Jamie clicked off the phone, pinching the bridge of his nose, wondering how in the name of Christ and all his saints he ended up here, when he heard the bathroom door click open behind him.

“Were you talking to someone just now?” She asked, sounding so warm and soft and sweet it killed him a little just to listen to her voice echoing across his flat. “I thought I heard you saying something.”

She came around into his line of vision, standing across from him on the other side of the island, looking so cute he wanted to scream. All rosy cheeks and and creamy limbs in a worn old rag of a t-shirt, the words Oxford Nursing written across the front in white block letters. Before he could stop himself, he wished they hadn’t swung by her flat first so she could pack a few things in a bag. Wished they’d come straight here— imagined her wearing one of his shirts instead. Something feral and possessive clawed at his chest, and he coughed, trying to stamp it out.

“Murtagh. My captain,” he said, hoarse and low. “Checking in.”

She nodded, absorbing this, mouth working like she wasn’t sure what to say next.

“How did you know?” She asked eventually. “To come to the hospital, I mean.”

“Oh,” he bit the inside of his cheek, looked down at his feet. “Well, ye usually text me, ye ken, when yer headin’ home from yer late shifts and when ye didn’t I got a wee bit worried.”

He smiled, cheeks feeling too hot as he went on. “And then when the call came over the radio, I….”
he swallowed, shrugging his shoulders. “... I just knew.”

He looked up to see her staring at him, eyes shining with something that scared him— scared him because it was too close to that thing inside him, that constant burning knot in the pit of his stomach. She moved, tiny feet padding soft against the hardwood floors as she circled around to him. He turned automatically, welcoming whatever she was about to give him, even though he knew he shouldn’t— because he was weak, and knew he could never deny her anything, even if he wanted to.

She came up on him quick and sure, slipping her arms around his waist, forehead pressed against his chest. Automatically his hands came up, pushing into the mass of her hair, leaning in to press his lips to her crown. Felt the hitch of her breath against him, knew she had to hear his heart pounding a furious beat in his chest.

“I forgot my phone charger,” she said, not pulling back.

He snorted. “Of course ye did,” he rolled his eyes, because she was always forgetting things and even that he found endearing. “Ye can use mine.”

She nodded, and started squirming against him, like she couldn’t get close enough. He savored the feeling, relishing in it, realizing almost too late that she needed to stop, that as close as they were, she’d feel—

His hands fell to her shoulders as he gently pushed her back a little, holding her away from him as he cupped her cheeks. He didn’t stop himself from touching her now, knew that wall between them came down back at the hospital, when he’d held her in his arms.

Suddenly, it was back. That voice in his head— the one that sometimes let him believe that maybe, just maybe, he could be good enough, that he could find it in himself to be a man that deserved her.

Okay, so you can touch her, it reasoned. But you keep it controlled. Know your boundaries. Nothing sexual, nothing that could lead to more.

“You should get some sleep.” He said, thumbs running over the arches of her cheek bones.

Her eyes flicked around the sparse space of his studio. “Where?”
His lips turned up in a smile he couldn’t stop. “I’ll take the couch.”

She frowned, furrowing her brow, making him want to smooth it with his thumb.

“But it’s your bed.”

“Ye expect me to sleep sound in a bed, while a lass who’s just been attacked lies on my plank board of a couch?”

Not waiting for an answer, he pressed a quick, thoughtless kiss to her forehead before shoving her in the direction of the bed. She caught his arm though, pulling herself back to him. She looked up at him, anxious and hesitant, worrying her bottom lip.

“What is it?”

She stepped forward, pushing back into his embrace, and he let her, like he didn’t have a choice—like he wasn’t a giant, and like she didn’t probably weigh less than his left leg.

“I don’t want to sleep alone.” She whispered, all soft and sweet against his chest. “Not tonight. Just not tonight.”

He froze. A heart beat, two heart beats, and then—

“Please.”

And he wanted to laugh, really, because he was supposed to be stronger than this. He thought of that past life, the one that made holding something as sweet as her in his arms feel illegal. A life where he’d been forced to lie, to steal, to kill people with his bare fucking hands and he’d done it all without a second thought.

And now, here he was, and he couldn’t do something as stupidly easy as say no to this woman, the thought of denying her anything sticking like bile in the back of his throat.
And so, he only nodded, mute, feeling weak. He slipped into the bathroom, changing into pajama pants and a t-shirt— more clothes than he would normally wear to bed, but he was already doing more than enough to tempt fate.

He stepped out of the bathroom and the sight of her curled up in his bed nearly had him running back in to take a cold shower. Walking with slow, cautious foot steps, he approached the bed, slipping in beside her feeling stiff and awkward. She lay turned away from him and for a second he thought she might roll over, might press herself against him like she did in the kitchen. Half of him was praying that she wouldn’t, the other half, the weaker half, praying that she would.

She didn’t, though, and that was probably a good thing. In moments he was asleep.

He woke up the next morning with his front pressed tight up against her back, wrapped around her in a ball, like he’d chased her across the bed as she curled herself smaller and smaller. He cursed under his breath, jumped out of bed, and locked himself in the bathroom, shoving at his pajama bottoms. He barely had time to wrap a hand around his cock, barely had time to picture her, naked and writhing beneath him, before he was spending into his hand, groaning her name like a bitten off curse.

It wasn’t the first time he’d thought of it, of course, but it was the first time he’d let himself get off to it and he felt sick with shame. Here she was, fresh off being attacked, looking for protection and safety. And here he was, thinking about fucking her. He gripped either side of the sink, scowling at himself in the mirror before he shoved at the faucet handles, rinsing the evidence of his weakness from his hands.

Back in the kitchen, he set himself to make breakfast, trying to make as little noise as possible as he gently extricated pots and pans from the cabinet next to the oven. The stove was built into the island, facing the rest of the studio, so he could steal quick glances of her sleeping form as he worked. He whisked eggs in a bowl, was just dumping them into a sizzling pan when she stirred.

She sat up, blinking around like she was trying to figure out where she was. Swung out of bed, scrubbing a hand over her face before ambling over towards him. He watched, mesmerized, wondering how someone so short could have such long, endless legs. She smiled at him, wide and sleep bleary and sweet enough to eat, as she boosted up onto one of the stools at the island.

“Good Morning,” she sang, bringing a hand up to smooth out her sleep mangled curls.
“Mornin’,” he replied. “Sleep well?”

*Mmhmm.* She hummed, eyes running over him in a way that made him want to kiss the breath out of her. “You?”

“Never better,” he forced out, hating how true it was. Hating how the smell of her, the warmth of her in his bed while he slept somehow fought off the monsters that hunted him in his dreams. How he’d slept without nightmares for the first time in so long, he couldn’t even remember.

She was animated and cheery as she chatted away, practically wiggling in her stool as she waited for breakfast. He swatted at her hand when it reached for the plate of bacon cooling beside the stove. Laughing with her, talking with her, filling his heart with a warmth that he could live a hundred more years and still not deserve.

His chest felt tight, like he couldn’t get enough air in his lungs. He was panicking, frantic and desperate, because he knew he was fucked. Knew it because he was giving everything in him away, because he was falling in love with a woman that could never—*should* never—love him back. Because he was keeping her in his flat and in his life like it was all fucking sustainable and there was no chance in hell he’d be making it out alive.

*December 2005*

*Two months passed and Jamie didn’t hear a word from Colum. Sat in calculus class that afternoon thinkin’ maybe he wouldn’t do it and that was good because Jamie decided he really didn’t want him to. Couldn’t handle the guilt of it, the mere thought of it. Convinced himself that there had to be another way to find some peace.*

*But then the school day ended and when Jamie got outside, he somehow knew that black suv idling at the curb was waiting for him.*

“How are we going?” He asked.

“You’ll see,” Colum told him, sitting next to him in the back seat, working on a laptop.

*Twenty minutes later they came to an old abandoned factory on the outskirts of town. Colum lead him to a viewing room, with a large picture window that overlooked the abandoned production*
“What is this?” He asked.

Colum only nodded towards the window. Jamie stepped forward just in time to see a group of dark suited men escorting St.Germain—bound and gagged—on to the production floor.

He gasped, stepping back, only to have Colum push him forward again.

“Where ye going lad?” He sneered. “This is what ye wanted.”

Jamie watched in horror as one of the dark suited men started handing out baseball bats. Could hear the muffled sounds of St.Germain’s screams as he begged, pleaded for his life. Made to turn away as the baseball bats started pounding into the man’s flesh, unable to bear it as the screams got louder, more desperate.

“Ah ah ah!” His Uncle tutted, catching him by the arm, bringing him back to the window.

Stood there behind him, held his head up with an iron grip, fingers on his face, forcing his eyes to stay open, forcing him to watch as St. Germain was beaten, beaten until he no longer looked human, all the while whispering in his ear—

“This is what you wanted. You asked for this. This is who you are.”

And when it was over, when St. Germain lay lifeless and bloody on the floor, he tousled his hair with a soothing hand.

“See? It’s all over.”

Finally shoving away, Jamie fell to his knees and emptied his guts. He coughed and wretched while his Uncle watched. Once he finally managed to compose himself, he surged to his feet, charging.

“You sick bastard!” He roared, hurling a fist at Colum’s face only to have it caught in an iron grip.
“Easy now,” he sneered. “Yer the one who wanted vengeance for that pathetic excuse ye call a Father.”

“Fuck you,” Jamie seethed. “He was twice the man ye are!”

And then Colum’s fist made contact with Jamie’s nose, breaking it on impact. He staggered back, gasping, hands coming to his face trying to catch the blood.

“I’m gonna have fun fixin’ that attitude, Lad.” Colum laughed, shaking out his hand.

Jamie paled, couldn’t help but be embarrassed by the tears streaking down his cheeks. “What do ye mean?”

“Don’t ye remember?” The older man asked, cocking his head to one side. “The bargain we made?”

Realization and horror washed up over him, sending another churning wave of nausea through his guts.

Colum smiled, slow and evil. “Yer life is mine lad.”
Chapter Notes

Posting schedule might change next week or the week after that bc real life is getting crazy and I might have trouble keeping up, but I'll do my best! But Chapter Nine will for sure go up on Friday, and then Ten will go up for sure on Monday. I'll add a note if I do end up deciding to change the pace!

A week and a half later….

Claire bit her lip, trying to hide the ridiculous smile on her face as she looked down at her phone.

J: I canna believe this Sassenach. Not a single one?

C: Nope! Sorry to disappoint.

Jamie had never been much for texting just for the sake of making conversation, but since her attack, he’d taken to chatting her up throughout the day. She was sure he was only doing it to keep her mind occupied in the wake of her ordeal. But she didn’t care, not really, gladly accepting as much of it as he was willing to give.

J: Christ. And here I’ve taken such a faithless wretch in to my own home.

C: I know, what would Mr. Bond say?

They’d been discussing movies when Claire made the unfortunate confession that she’d never seen any of the James Bond movies. A fact that distressed Jamie to a hilarious degree.

J: Ye ken we’ll have to be amending this transgresion.

C: I would expect nothing less. How many movies did you say there were?
She snorted, shaking her head as she typed a response.

C: You expect me to watch 23 movies?

J: Well not all at once lass.

“Claire, could I speak with you for a moment?”

Her head snapped up to see Dr. Hildegard approaching her where she sat behind the main nurse’s desk in the NICU.

“Of course,” she said, rising to her feet as she brushed off crumbs from the granola bar she’d been eating.

“This is Colin Mackenzie, he’s one of the department’s newest donors.”

Dr. Hildegarde stepped to one side, revealing a tall, dark headed man behind her. He was dressed impeccably, in an expensive looking three-piece suit.

“Mr. Mackenzie, this is one of our nurses, Claire Beauchamp.”

She shook Collin’s hand, getting the eerie sensation that he seemed familiar somehow. Something about the straight, hard line of his nose and the slant of his cat-like blue eyes.

“Nice to meet you,” she said.

“And you,” he said in turn, giving her a disarmingly charming smile.
“He was hoping for a tour, and unfortunately I’m due for a meeting with the other department heads,” Dr. Hildegard explained, looking at Claire hopefully. “Would you mind showing him around?”

She nodded. “I’d be happy to.”

They walked together through the NICU making various stops so she could explain the function of certain machines, and answer any questions he had. He was uncommonly pleasant, giving her his attention, listening politely as they meandered through the corridors.

“How long have you been working here?” he asked as they neared the end of the tour.

“Oh, just a few months,” she said. “I started over the summer.”

“And do ye like it so far?”

“Very much,” she said, tilting her head to one side, considering.

She’d thought she’d heard the barest hint of a Scottish accent, but wasn’t sure until she caught that certain lilt to his voice just now. She wondered if she should ask at all, since he was so clearly trying to suppress it.

“Where in Scotland are you from?” she asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

“Good ear, Lass,” he grinned broadly. “I’m from the highlands, about twenty miles north of Inverness.”

“What brings you to London?”

“Business,” he shrugged. “And family.”

She cupped a hand over her mouth, trying to muffle a yawn. “You have family here?”
“A nephew.”

They stood in front of the elevators now, and her mind raced, trying to come up with a polite way to end the conversation, needing to get back to work.

“Are you close with him?”

“I used to be,” he smiled. “I should let ye get back to your work, Claire.”

He pushed the elevator call button.

“It was lovely meeting you,” she said, shaking his hand.

“And you as well.”

*****

“If I lose my badge for this Fraser…”

“Och, dinna be so dramatic,” Jamie scoffed, leaning on the edge of Foster’s desk in the bullpen. “It’s no’ that serious, I’m just asking for an update.”

Foster rubbed the back of his neck, leaning back in his chair. “The Captain said you weren’t to get involved. Besides, I’m not even a detective.”

“Aye, I ken that but yer still workin’ with the ones assigned to the case,” he pointed out. “C’mon, man, just give me something.”

“Well, there’s not much to give you to be honest,” Foster admitted, blowing out a huge breath. “There’s a reason they’ve not been able to catch him. He’s good. Never leaves behind evidence, and usually there aren’t any witnesses.”
He nodded, considering. “But with Claire’s testimony, surely there must be--”

“Officer Fraser.”

Both of their heads snapped up to see Murtagh on the edge of the bull pen, signing off on some paperwork.

“Can I see ye in my office?”

Jamie snapped up at once. “Uh, aye, sir.”

“I swear to god, Fraser…” Foster groaned, running a hand through his hair.

Jamie waved a dismissive hand at him. “Och, relax Princess, I’m no’ a snitch.”

He couldn’t help but feel a twinge of anxiety though, as he made his way over to the Captain’s office. Even Jamie, who had known Murtagh all his life, knew better than to go against his wishes. Captain Murtagh Fitzgibbons ran a tight ship, and while all of his officers respected and liked him, he scared the shit out of absolutely all of them.

Jamie followed Murtagh into his office and shut the door behind him.

“Sit down,” Murtagh said, settling down into his own chair behind his desk. “Having a good day so far?”

“Fine, sir. Busy.”

“Och, aye,” he laughed. “Ye looked awful busy over there, whisperin’ sweet nothings in Foster’s ear.”

Jamie sat up straighter in his chair. “Oh, um, well we were just--”
“Save it, lad,” he said, waving him off. “I dinna care if ye ask him for updates on the case, I just don’t want ye getting involved. That’s no’ what I meant to speak to ye about anyway.”

“Oh, aye?”

“Aye,” he scratched absently at the scruff at his jaw. “It’s about Annaliese.”

Jamie stiffened. “What about her?”

“Have ye seen her again?”

“No. Not since that one time in the coffee house,” he said, feeling his stomach drop to the floor. “Why?”

“I put a tab on her with immigration,” Murtagh explained, holding up his phone as though in evidence. “Looks like she left the country a few days ago.”

“Oh,” He sat back in his chair, feeling like all the air was rushing out of him.

“That’s good, aye?” Murtagh asked hopefully. “Maybe yer Uncle really just did send her to check in.”

Jamie thumbed at his bottom lip, relieved but not totally convinced. “Maybe.”

They sat in silence for a long time before Murtagh spoke again, changing the subject.

“How’s Claire?”

He’d long since stopped trying to fight the smile that tugged at his lips whenever Claire came up in conversation.
“She’s good.”

Murtagh smirked at him. “I’m assuming you’re still in denial?”

“I dinna ken what you mean.”

“Mhmm,” he hummed suggestively.

Jamie huffed a breath, tired of having this conversation. “I’m tellin’ ye, it’s no’ li--”

“I swear to Christ, Lad, if ye say ‘it’s no’ like that’ one more time I’ll have yer badge.”

“Alright, alright,” he surrendered, raising his hands defensively. “Look, I won’t deny there are… feelings. At least on my end.”

Murtagh arched a single bushy brow at him. “Not on hers?”

He nodded, shrugging, trying to come up with an excuse to get him out of having this discussion.

“Why’re ye so sure?”

Because she can’t feel that way about me. I would ruin her life. Because I should have never tried so hard to be around her in the first place.

“She sees me as a friend.”

“Ye ken many friends who stay in a studio flat together?”

Jamie pursed his lip, blowing air through his nostrils in irritation. “It’s no’ like--”
He clamped his mouth shut, getting a warning look from Murtagh.

“Ye ken why she’s there,” he pointed out. “It’s for her own safety. And it’s no’ like we sleep in the same bed or anything.”

And that was mostly true. They hadn’t slept in the same bed together since that first night. She hadn’t asked, and he hadn’t offered.

The old man through his hands up in exasperation. “Och, c’mon, the two of ye are together all the time.”

“Not all the time,” Jamie insisted.

Someone started tapping on the office window.

“Hey Fraser, ye’ve got a visitor.”

Jamie turned, peering through the blinds to see Claire chatting with a few of the other officers. She looked even tinier than normal, surrounded by the big men that roamed the precinct, wrapped up in the thick wool sweater she’d stolen from his closet.

It’d become something of a routine, when they were on similar shift schedules, for her to come by the station after she left the hospital, so they could walk back to his flat together.

The other officers were used to her now, though a few of them had been a touch too friendly in the beginning. Jamie hated it and wanted nothing more than to make sure every single officer in the precinct knew that Claire Beauchamp was off-fucking limits. He couldn’t do that though, didn’t have the right. To his relief, however, the attention and flirtation slowly died away. He couldn’t prove it, of course, but Jamie had his suspicions as to who might’ve told them to back off.

Murtagh raised an arm in her direction, evidence to his point.
“Look, Jamie.” He sighed heavily. “I ken ye’ve had a rough go of it in life. I ken ye think ye don’t deserve to be happy. But take it from an auld man who’s been there-- there’s no’ much a point in bein’ alive if ye don’t let yerself live.”

He groaned, rolling his eyes. “Ye writin’ poetry now?”

“Only in my free time. Now get out, yer wife’s waitin’.”

Jamie made a Scottish noise of disapproval, tried not to think about what the mere mention of Claire as his wife did to him as he stood up and left the office.

She was sitting at his desk now, spinning herself around in his desk chair as she waited for him. He came up behind her, caught the back of his chair with his hand, turning her around to face him.

“Hi,” she beamed up at him, the tip of her nose pink from the chill of the fall air.

“Hi.”

She looked around him, back towards the office he’d just walked out of, biting her lip anxiously.

“Am I early?” she asked as he grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. “I hope I didn’t pull you out of something important.”

“Och, nah,” he smiled, slipping on his coat. “Yer right on time.”

“Hey, Fraser!” One of the other officers—Alec—called to him from across the bullpen. “A few of us are going out for a pint in a few. You in?”

“I’m afraid I’ve got plans already,” he called back, pushing Claire towards the door. “Raincheck?”

Outside, they walked closely side by side, shoulders bumping together.
“You don’t have to blow off your friends just to hang out with me, you know,” she told him, shooting him a shy smile.

“I’m no’ blowin’ anyone off,” he assured her. “Besides, we do have plans, don’t ye remember?”

He draped an arm over her, ignoring the voice, the one that told him that he was only making it harder, and enjoyed the feeling of her pressed close against him.

“23 movies, Sassenach. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”
A Wish

Chapter Notes

Again posting schedule will probably change soon, but chapter ten will for sure post on Monday at 12 AM. Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Jamie was sitting at his desk, rubbing his eyes as he tried to get through his last bit of paperwork. It’d been a mind-numbingly boring shift. Things in Kensington were quiet and he’d spent most of his time on patrol texting Claire. He did, however, respond to a domestic disturbance call and had to break up a shouting match between an older Polish couple.

While he was something of a polyglot, speaking fluently in a variety of languages, he didn’t know a lick of Polish. And thus, given this obstacle in communication, it had been something of an ordeal, both to ascertain the cause of the dispute, and to settle it.

Eventually, he managed to coax them into halting English. He still wasn’t at all sure what the fight was about, and he wasn’t sure it mattered. It was clear enough to him that it hadn’t been violent in nature, only loud and disruptive. He left them with a warning, and now, back at the station, he was saddled with the mind numbing task of filling out the required paperwork.

He found himself thinking of something Annaliese had said to him, that time in the coffee house.

Do you really think this life will be enough for you?

Yes, he thought, with absolute certainty, but felt his heart in his throat, because it wasn’t the police work that made this life enough.

When he was fifteen, he’d stood before his Uncle, angry and hungry for violence, looking for a fight.

“What do you want, Lad?” He’d asked.


And now, he only wanted one thing. One woman. One woman that had wormed her way into his heart and into his life so deep that he was sure he wouldn’t survive when she left. And she would leave him. When she found out what he was.

“Hey Jamie.”

He looked up to see Geillis walking over towards his desk, peering behind her hopefully, looking for Claire. He thought she was working late at the hospital, but maybe—

“Just me I’m afraid,” she said, smiling sympathetically. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“What’s up Geillis?” he asked, ignoring the remark.

“Well, as ye ken, Claire’s birthday is this Saturday.”

He kept is face blank. “Is it?”
Of course, he was painfully aware that October the 20th was approaching rapidly. Had spent the better part of the last week obsessing over it, racking his brain for the perfect gift.

She arched a brow at him. “Ye mean to tell me she’s been in yer flat for three weeks, and ye didna ken about her birthday?”

He rolled his eyes, not even bothering with his usual litany of denials. Even though it really fucking wasn’t like that, and she was just staying with him until it was safe for her to go home again. And it didn’t matter that the idea of living in that flat without her made him want to vomit. Didn’t matter at all.

“Did ye need something Geillis?”

“Louise and I want to take her out for a wee girls night, but neither of us can do it on Saturday,” she explained. “And I just wanted to make sure ye didna have anything planned with her on Friday.”

“Nah, I dinna have anything planned.” He said truthfully. “I’m working Friday night.”

“Och, well that works out then.” She chirped, pleased. “You can have her on her actual birthday.”

Jamie opened his mouth to respond, but Geillis was already out the door.

“See ye, Fraser.”

He muttered under his breath, leaning forward with his elbows on his desk, rubbing hard at his eyes.

“Bad time?”

Jeremy Foster stood by his desk, eating an apple.

“Nah, what’s up?”

He took another huge bite, chewed for moment before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Thought ye’d like to know, there’s been a break in Claire’s case.”

Jamie’s ears perked up. “Aye?”

“Turns out he did slip up,” Foster explained. “Left a bit of DNA at a pharmacy over in Battersea.”

“And?”

“And,” he went on. “They ran it through the system, came up with a match for a guy named Robert Horrocks. He’s Irish, and matches the physical description Claire gave us.”

Jamie pursed his lips in thought. “Does he have a record?”

“Petty theft mostly,” he paused, taking another bite of apple. “They haven’t charged him formally yet, but I thought you’d like to know.”

“Aye,” he said. “Ye’ll keep me posted?”

“Sure thing.”

Foster walked away, leaving Jamie to sort through his feelings. Of course he was relieved that Claire’s attacker had likely been caught, but at the same time he was devastated, well and truly, now that her departure from his flat was looming before him. He could wait until Horrocks was charged,
but then he’d have to let her go.

He sat there for a long time, long after his shift ended, just praying— something he hadn’t done in years. Praying to God, Christ, to anyone that would listen. They could send him to hell, could spend eternity making him pay for every single one of his sins. He didn’t care. Just please, please, let him keep her.

*****

The day before her birthday, Claire decided to treat herself, going by the coffee house on Bleecker Street for a sugary hot drink and a pastry. As of late, her and Jamie’s shifts hadn’t been syncing up, so they hadn’t been by together in a while. Claire hummed happily, as she stepped in off the cold street, letting the warm smell of coffee and sugar wash over her.

She ordered her treats to go, and was just leaving, stopping just before the door as she dug around in her purse for her cell phone. She hoped she hadn’t left it at the studio because Jamie’s favorite thing, apparently, was teasing her when she forgot things.

“Fancy seeing you here, Nurse Beauchamp.”

The voice was low, rumbling and familiar. She turned, blinking over at the table by the door where a dark haired man sat working on his laptop.

“Oh,” she said, as familiarity washed over her. “Hello, Mr. Mackenzie.”

“Please,” he smiled, closing his laptop as he stood, moving over to shake her hand. “Call me Colin.”

“Colin,” she smiled, dropping her hand away. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Indeed. Do you live in the neighborhood?”

She nodded. “Yes. This place is a favorite of mine.”

She glanced down at the computer at his table. “I should probably get out of your hair and let you get back to whatever you’re working on.”

“You’re not in my hair at all. I’m just waiting on a colleague. In fact—” he said, gesturing behind her. “Here he is now.”

He was shorter than Colin but not by much, with soft blond hair she wore smoothed over to one side. For some reason, the hairs on the back of Claire’s neck stood on end.


“It’s a pleasure, Miss Beauchamp,” he said in an almost too perfectly posh English accent.

She shook his hand trying to place the inexplicable shot of anxiety that coursed through her.

“Well I better go,” she said. “Work.”

She settled her bag higher on her shoulder before turning to Colin. “It was nice seeing you again.”

*****

In honor of Claire’s birthday weekend, Dr. Hildegard sent her home a few hours before her shift actually ended, which gave her plenty of time to go home (she really had to stop thinking of Jamie’s flat as home) and try on the dress she planned to wear that night. Though she was excited for dinner
with Geillis and Louise, there was only one person she really wanted to spend her birthday with.

Jamie wasn’t home when she used the key he’d given her to unlock his flat. As strange as their situation was, they’d actually made it work quite nicely. Jamie carved out a place for her in his home without effort or thought, as though she fit into his life as easily as breathing.

She kept her clothes on a rack he’d set up by the bed. She slid the hangers down the rod, sifting through the garments until she found what she was looking for. It was a burgundy sweater dress that hung a little too high on her thighs, made somewhat less scandalous by a pair of over the knee brown suede boots.

She was examining the ensemble in the floor length mirror Jamie had hung up on the back of his bathroom door a week into her stay, when she heard the door unlocking behind her.

“Oh,” Jamie said, sounding a little breathless. Clearly fresh from the gym, his golden skin was glistening with sweat. He was dressed in basketball shorts and a zip up hoodie— the emblem of the London Police department stamped across the chest.

“Hi,” she said back, a little breathless in turn.

“What are ye wearing?” he asked her, eyes narrowed, face unreadable.

“I was planning to wear this tonight,” she told him hesitantly. “For dinner with Geillis and Louise.”

He didn’t say anything at first, and Claire felt her cheeks pinking with embarrassing. “Do you not like it or something?”

“No,” he said quickly, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair. “I didna mean… ye look bonny, Claire, I just…”

“What is it?”

He kept his lips clamped tightly shut for a few minutes before finally blurting. “Don’t ye think it’s too short?”

She blinked, stunned. “Excuse me?”

“Christ,” he groaned, running a hand over his face. “Forget I said anything.”

“Jamie—” she said, reaching out for him as he walked by her.

He dodged her, stalking into the bathroom. “I need a shower.”

******

In the end the dinner was fine. The food was fine, the booze was more than fine, and Geillis and Louise were rowdy and carefree in that way that usually made her really glad to be around them. But tonight it was her birthday— or almost her birthday— and if she was being honest with herself, there was only one person she cared to spend it with.

She wasn’t that drunk, not really, but she still stumbled a little as she climbed out of the Uber in front of the precinct. Pulling her phone out of her purse, she clicked on the lock screen.

11:50. She still had time.
Feeling bold and hopeful with liquid courage running through her veins, she pushed through the doors and into the bullpen. It was mostly empty, expect for one red headed Scot working at his desk.

“Sassenach?” He looked up, surprised but undoubtedly pleased. “What are ye doing here?”

She bit her lip, shrugged, finding the words stuck in her throat. He had turned his chair to face her and it was easy to climb into his lap. She arranged herself sideways, so that her booted legs hooked over the arm of the chair. Wrapped her arms around him, pressed her face to his neck.

“Claire?” He rasped, hands coming up almost automatically to rub at spine and thigh. “Are ye alright?”

She nodded.

“Are ye drunk?”

Again, she nodded. Her eyes flicked over to a clock on the wall.

11:54.

“How did ye get here?”

“Uber.”

“Uber?” He stiffened. “Lass, ye canna be takin’ Ubers alone.”

“Stop.” She whispered into his chest. “Can you just… can you just let me be here for a little while?”

He was silent for a long moment. “Aye.”

11:55.

“There was cake.” She said after another long silence. “And candles.”

“Aye? Did ye make a wish?”

11:56.

She nodded, letting her lips press lightly over the slope of his neck, inching higher and higher.

“What’d ye wish for?”

She shook her head. “Can’t tell you. Might not come true.”

And she needed it to come true.

11:57

“It’s my birthday in three minutes.” She told him, shivering when she felt his hum of acknowledgement.

11:58

11:59

Heart pounding in her chest, she wrapped her arms tight around his neck, bringing lips up over his jaw, across his cheek, inching closer and closer and closer to the corner of his mouth.
Please, please, please.

12:00

It was featherlight, hesitant, hopeful—an invitation for more, if he was willing. Seconds seemed to stretch into moments, moments into hours, and hours into days, while she waited, brushing her lips over the corner of his.

Please, please, please.

A shift between them and then he was turning his head away from her. She held him tighter, pressing her face hard into the curve of his neck.

“I should take you home.”

“No,” she said, sniffing and pulling back again.

She took his face in her hands, pressing thumbs into his jawline. Wanting to hit him because it wasn’t fair. Wasn’t fair because she gave him everything, told him everything, let him see through her glass face. Knew he had to be seeing every single thing she was feeling. And yet when she looked into his eyes, she saw nothing. Blank. Unreadable.

“Please.”

His eyes changed then, and she could almost see the wall coming down. Could see the indecision, the push and pull, the war between should and shouldn’t.

His gaze fell, zeroed in on her mouth. Her hands ran up into his hair, scratching at his scalp, and she started to rock, desperate for something, anything to quell the heat burning low between her hips.

“Claire…” he hissed in a gravelly whisper, caught somewhere between a plea and a warning.

And this time, when she leaned forward, pressed her mouth against him, he didn’t turn away. Instead, he turned a little towards her. Just a little. But it was enough.

She shifted the press of her lips a little away from the corner, more towards the full swell of his mouth, and again he didn’t turn away. He pursed his lips in away that almost felt like he was kissing back and, and—

—she couldn’t stop the hitch of her breath.

“Shit,” he bit out, sounding desperate.

He dug a hand hard in her hair, smashing her against his mouth with a force that had all sorts of sounds ripping from her chest.

She felt his grip change, and he was running his hands up down her sides, and it was everything and he was everything and then—

He wrenched her away, ripping her mouth off of his with a hard tug of her hair.

“What?” She panted.

“Stop,” he said, with a cold finality that made her feel foolish—made her want to cry.

He shoved gently at her thighs, forcing her off his lap.
“We’re going home.”
He dreamed of his Da that night, something he seldom did. Or when he did, it took the form of a nightmare. A horrific rehashing of the last time he’d seen his father — dying, gasping and choking on his own blood.

This dream, though, was one he’d never had before, of a conversation he’d long forgotten.

_He was 13, awkward and shy — confused by the way that the lassies at school suddenly, overnight, changed from just another set of bones and limbs he passed in the hallway to the object of his near constant attention._

“How d’ye ken it, Da?” He asked. “That ye’ve found the right lass?”

_His Father looked up from the old truck engine he was tuning, regarding him with pursed lips._

“I dinna ken, son. Ye look at her and ye just…” He trailed off. “Ye just know.”

_Jamie considered this for a long while before—_

“Sounds daft to me.”

And it was daft. It was really fucking daft, because he had found that woman and he had known it from the first second he laid eyes on her. And he couldn’t have her. He couldn’t, because he loved her and he failed her. Failed her by getting himself all kinds of fucked up, so that by the time she found him there wasn’t anything left.

_But there is something left. Isn’t there?_

It was that voice again, calling to him like a siren as he lay on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling in the dark, listening to Claire breathe across the room.

She was mad at him. The walk home had been deathly silent, their return to the flat colored by
slammed doors and averted eyes. And he deserved it, he knew. Should’ve never let it get that far. She was drunk and he should’ve taken control of the situation a whole lot sooner.

He barely managed to turn away the first time, hoping she wouldn’t try it again. But then she did and her lips felt soft and sweet, like they could kiss him open and taste his secrets.

And then she’d made that sweet little hitching sound against his mouth, and he lost it. Part of him — an angry, deep, wanting part — wanted to show her exactly what kind of fire she was playing with. To claim her mouth with lips and tongue and teeth, to scorch her with the feral heat of his wanting. To show her that what he was after was so much more than a drunken make out.

*See? There is something left.*

There were always two voices in his head. One that saw him for who he was — a man that killed and stole and hurt in the name of something that didn’t even matter.

And then another, that sometimes let him think maybe he wasn’t so bad. Or, at least, that he could be better. For a long time, that voice, the kinder one, was the far weaker of the two. It would hide in the shadows of his brain, always an undercurrent. Like it didn’t have the fuel to survive, didn’t have anything to fight for.

And then he met Claire and that voice seemed to come to life. Coming to him in moments of weakness, moments when he wanted something from her, something he knew he couldn’t take. The voice would come to him and say that he could take it. Just this one more thing. One more inch.

*Just be near her, don’t talk to her.*

*Just talk to her, don’t be her friend.*

*Be her friend, but don’t touch her.*

*Touch her, but don’t let it escalate.*

And he really thought that was as far as he could be pushed. He was sure, then, that the voice had
reached its limits. And then she came into the station in her too-short dress and too-pretty face, eyes trained on him like he was the only man in the world.

Her lips touched his and the voice went into overdrive.

*She wants you. She wants this. Just one kiss. She’s asking you for this, and you know you couldn’t deny her anything if you wanted to.*

The phone rang, making him lurch off the couch, grabbing it off the coffee table before it woke Claire. He frowned down at the screen.

“Foster?” He whispered, moving towards the kitchen.

“Hey, man. Just thought you’d want to know, they charged Horrocks.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face, trying to wake up. “Who?”

“Horrocks. Robert Horrocks. The man who—”

“Aye, right, sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “So they’ve brought him in then?”

His heart started catching up, started sinking in his chest, realizing what this meant.

“Yep. His bail hearing isn’t till Monday though, so he could still get out.”

Jamie was silent as he considered this. And then, there came the voice.

*He could make bail. No point in sending her home, if you’ll have to turn around and bring her back again.*

“You there?” Foster asked.
“Aye, I am. Thanks for the update.”

“No problem. Enjoy the day off, alright?”

“You too.”

He clicked off the phone, turning around and almost jumping out of his skin when he found Claire waiting behind him.

“Who was that?” she asked, looking much too alert this early in the morning.

He blinked. That voice came back. *He could make bail…*

“Wrong number.”

She nodded and if she suspected he was lying, she didn’t let on. The silence drew out between them, and he suddenly felt like he should say something.

“About last night, I—”

“I want you to teach me how to fight,” she said bluntly.

For a second, all he could do was blink back at her.

“What?”

“Those classes you teach. Down at the gym. I want one.”

As part of the police department’s community outreach program, Jamie sometimes taught self-defense classes, specialized for women. He’d been nagging Claire to take one almost the entire time he’d known her, a little obsessed with how small she was and how easily someone could overpower
her. She’d always refused though, assuring him it wasn’t necessary.

He couldn’t figure out why in the hell she wanted one now.

“Claire—”

“You want me to be safe, don’t you?” She arched a brow at him.

“Well— I— I dinna ken, I’d have to see about scheduling— “

She shrugged. “They have private rooms at the gym, don’t they?”

Slowly, he nodded. “Aye.”

“Good.” She cocked her head towards the bathroom. “Get dressed.”

*****

Forty-five minutes later, they were standing in one of the private training rooms at the gym. Given the nature of their activity, he’d asked for one with padded floors. Despite the cold weather, Claire wore nothing more than a too-thin t-shirt and too-short shorts, insisting that she could just wear a jacket outside as they walked out the door.

He regarded her suspiciously as he stepped out into the center of the room.

“Alright, so we’ll start with—”

“Can we just skip straight to the demonstration please?” She insisted, hands on her hips, tapping her foot impatiently — that same way she had the first morning they met.

He frowned. “Claire, I have to go over at least a few things with you first. I don’t want to hurt ye.”

“No need,” she insisted. “I can take anything you’ve got.”
His brows shot up to his hairline. “Anything I’ve got?”

“That’s right,” she nodded, smiling provocatively. “C’mon big guy. Do your worst.”

They stared each other down for a few more minutes until Jamie shrugged, shaking his head.

*Careful what ye wish for ye wee brat.*

And then he lunged for her.

If he had a mind to be objective, he would’ve taken a moment to appreciate her form. It was flawless. The way she angled his arm just so, waited until just the right second and shifted, using the force of his own weight against him.

The world turned upside down, and next thing he knew he was flat on his back, the air knocked straight from his lungs. He panted for breath as she crashed down on top of him, two hands hard on his shoulders, and a knee in his bollocks.

“What the hell is your problem?” she roared, glaring down at him.

He blinked at her, incredulous. “My problem? Jesus—”

He went to shove up, only to be greeted by a sharp press of her knee into his balls that had him flopping back down, yelping in pain.

“Christ, woman, have ye gone mad?”

“Yes, actually, I have,” she said, fierce and indignant. “And it’s entirely your fault.”
“What are ye—"

“No. Shut up. I’m gonna talk.”

He clamped his mouth shut, wondering how the hell he’d never known that his sweet Sassenach had this in her. Wondering if he’d ever been more turned on in his life.

“I’m sick and tired of you acting like I’m some fragile thing you need to protect. As you’ve just seen, I can take care of my fucking self.”

She took a deep breath, pressing harder down on his shoulders before going on.

“I know you think I only kissed you last night because I was drunk, but that’s not true.”

She paused, teeth in her lip, hesitating. And then, she set her jaw, eyes raising back to his in decision.

“I wasn’t that drunk and I kissed you last night because I wanted to. Because I have wanted to since the first time I saw you.”

“Wait—"

“I’m not finished. I wanted to kiss you, and you know what? I think you wanted to kiss me back. Am I wrong?”

He shook his head, blinking, trying to catch up, because it was all too much and he just needed a second to fucking think.

“Claire…”

She bit out a harsh, frustrated whine. “Oh for Christ’s sake, Jamie. Please just put me out of my misery.”
Surely she wasn’t saying what he thought she was saying. He’d been burning for her since the second they met. Did she really not see it?

The strong resolve slipped off her face as she took his silence as rejection. Her eyes watered, and her lower lip started to wobble.

*Christ, she’s fucking devastating.*

“Oh, Sassenach,” he laughed, gasping and shaking his head. “Do ye really no’ ken?”

Her eyes held his, lip still trembling as she spoke, now in a much smaller voice. “What?”

He shook his head, wanting to laugh because it was so horribly obvious. “Ye’re my whole world, Lass.”

She closed her eyes and made a small, desperate sound in the back of her throat, bringing a hand up off his shoulder and thumping it down hard on his chest.

“You bastard!” she hissed. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I thought ye knew!”

*I mean, hell, everyone else seemed to.*

“How was I supposed to know? You said you just wanted to be friends.”

He started, taken aback. “When did I say that?”

“At the hospital! After we — after the break in. Remember?”

He thought for a moment, trying to bring that day back to him. That day he’d gone to the hospital in
a blind desperation. So sure that he’d blown it. Willing to say anything, whatever he had to, to keep her in his life.

Shit. He was such a fool.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, opened them again, and tore the wall down. Leveled her with every ounce of love and devotion he had inside him.

“I’m sorry, Sassenach. Truly.”

They stared at one another for a long time, just breathing, taking it all in. Eventually, the corners of his mouth slowly lifted in a thoroughly impressed smirk.

“Where the hell’d ye learn a move like that?”

She arched a brow at him, looking so pleased with herself that he wanted to kiss the grin right off her face.

“You think I traipsed all over the world with Uncle Lamb and never learned how to defend myself?”

He barked a loud, surprised laugh, bringing his hands to her hips and shifting her so she was straddling him.

“So this was yer wee plan then?”

She bit her lip, nodding, cheeks blooming with that flush he loved so much.

He shook his head, chuckling and so in love with her that it was almost stupid. “I have to hand it to ye Sassenach — verra clever.”

“Well you know what they say,” she said, bringing herself down lower on his chest. “Desperation is the mother of invention.”
Her face was inching down, closer and closer, and he couldn’t find it in him to stop her.

“I thought that was necessity?”

She made a sound, half laugh, half whimper, as his hands ran up and down her sides. “What’s the difference?”

Her nose was brushing his and he was trying to remember how to breathe.

“Jamie?”

“Aye?” he gasped, relishing in the feeling of her breath on his face.

Her eyes searched his, so close that he could see every golden fleck in the pools of amber whisky.

“Will you kiss me now?”

Her voice was tinged with wanting and desperation and it cracked him wide open. His hand flew up, knotting hard in her hair, crashing her down that last inch onto his mouth.

It wasn’t the soft, sweet, tentative kiss like from the night before. This one was rough, bruising and desperate. He breathed ragged breaths into the space between their mouths, groaning when her tongue came out to meet his own.

Funny how months of discipline, weeks of no, and cant, and shouldn’t, can all come crashing down in such a blinding instant. And for once, he didn’t blame himself, because what living, breathing man could manage to think straight in the face of those perfect little sounds she was making? She started rolling against him, slowly at first and then harder, faster.

He could hear the sounds of people in the hall, and became all too aware of where they were.
“Ye need to stop.”

Not because he wanted her to, but because if they were gonna do this, it wasn’t gonna be on some dirty gym floor where anyone outside could hear. If they were gonna do this, it was gonna be in his flat, in his bed, where he could spend hours taking her apart bit by bit. Where she could scream for him, drown out the sounds of that voice in his head — the one that had already kept him from her long enough.

She pulled up, looked down at him, all smirk and arched brow, wiggling harder down on top of him.

“Why?” she asked him, with a bratty edge that shot straight through him.

Growling, he surged up, flipped her on her back, pressed down on top of her.

“Anything I got, huh?”

And then he rolled his hips hard into the hot spread of her legs.

“Ah,” she gasped, head rolling back.

He grinned down at her, victorious, the fabric between them both too much and too little. Rolled his hips harder, angling, pressing, pushing.

“Is this what ye want?” he gritted out.

She looked desperate, writhing beneath him, hands fisting in the front of his shirt. “Jamie—”

She bit off on a loud moan, teeth digging hard into her lower lip as she tried to stifle it.

He laughed. “Not so talkative now?”
And then he stopped laughing, as his hips started snapping forward in a frantic, staccato rhythm, like his mind wasn’t controlling them anymore.

“Shit.” He groaned, closing his eyes, panting open-mouthed breaths down onto her face.

He’d only meant to tease her, to get her back for putting him through the ringer that morning. It wasn’t supposed to feel this good, and he felt like he was fourteen because they were both still fully clothed and he was about to—

And then he froze at the sound of a pounding knock on the door.

“Wrap it up in there. We need the room,” came a voice from the other side.

He blinked down at her, a little stunned, before rolling off of her with a groan. They lay on their backs, side by side, panting up at the ceiling.

“Fuck,” he gasped.

“Yeah,” came her equally breathless reply.

They turned to each other then, and in the next second he was pulling her into his arms, both of them shaking in hysterical laughter.

“Jamie?” she asked, once the madness fell away.

“Aye?”

“Let’s go home.”
An Unexpected Visitor

Chapter Notes

Sorry I’ve been bad about responding to comments lately!! I see them all and they mean so much to me. I promise I will reply to as many of them as I can!! :-) 

The walk home from the gym was quick and laced with anticipation. By the time they made it to the side walk, Claire’s tiny, cold hand tucked into his, and Jamie felt the lightness of a heart redeemed. For if someone as sweet and good as her could want him, he couldn’t be that bad. Could he?

They were at a crosswalk, waiting for the light to change, when she started shivering, the light jacket she’d worn over her t-shirt and shorts clearly not doing the trick. He quirked a not so subtle I told you so brow at her before slipping the London PD windbreaker off his own shoulders and draping it over hers. Which was a mistake, because he was in basketball shorts and pretty soon everyone on the street was going to see exactly what the sight of her in his navy blue jacket did to him.

As they continued walking, she started tracing circles on the back of his hand, leaving him wondering how something so innocent could feel like foreplay. By the time they got back to his building he was all but dragging her into the lobby. So much for calm, cool and collected, he thought. They called the elevator and when it opened, there was no one inside. She stepped in first, shooting him a sly smile that went straight to his groin. He followed her, blindly hitting one of the buttons, hoping it would take them to the right floor, before the doors closed and he took her in his arms.

He’d kissed more than his fair share of women before — Colum always liked to have girls on hand and always got a kick out of pushing them into Jamie’s lap. But kissing Claire felt different, mostly because it didn’t feel like kissing at all. It felt like madness — like he was living and dying all at once, and it scared him a little because he wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to stop.

He heard the elevator ding as they ascended floor after floor, hauling her up against his chest, wrapping her legs around his waist as he slammed her into the back wall. Slamming her hard, ripping a broken noise from deep in her chest.

They arrived on Jamie’s floor and stepped out into the hall just like that — Claire wrapped around him like a vine, apparently not caring that it was 8:30 on a Saturday morning and any one of his neighbors could come out and see them. He stumbled to his door, leaving her legs wrapped tight around his waist as both his hands went to dig in his pockets for his keys.
They tumbled inside and Jamie felt out blindly, searching for the nearest horizontal surface, which happened to be the kitchen island. He sat her on the edge of it and stood between her legs, gripping her arse as he pulled her in close. He dimly heard the sound of his phone ringing in his pocket, but couldn’t have cared less. He pulled back long enough to rip the windbreaker up and over her head before he was on her again.

He gripped her hips hard, probably hard enough to leave bruises, but she didn’t seem to mind as she wriggled against him, hands pulling hard at the hair of his nape.

“The bed’s not far away you know,” she laughed, breathless and whiny, as he trailed hard and biting kisses across her cheek, over her jaw, and down her neck.

“Uh-huh,” he muttered against her skin, ignoring the sound of another phone call as he slowly inched up the hem of her t-shirt, moaning when his fingers crawled across warm skin.

He started to lower her until she laid back on the counter, when the phone rang again.

“Don’t you wanna get that?” she asked, gasping as as he pressed kisses into each new inch of skin as he pushed her t-shirt up.

“Not if it was the fuckin’ Queen of England,” he rumbled, before tugging the skin at her hip into his mouth, teeth scraping, sucking hard until he left a dark red mark.

The phone rang again, and Claire huffed. “Can you at least turn it off?”

She pressed the inside of her knee against the phone in his pocket.

“Keeps buzzing against my leg—” she mumbled, arching up against him, letting out a little *ah* sound when he left another mark on her other hip. “Distracting.”

He pulled up a little, breathing heavy as his arm snaked down to his pocket. “Can’t have that, can we?”

The huff of laughter fell away when he brought the phone up to his face, about to turn it off, and he
saw who it was.

“Shit,” he gasped, standing up.

“What?” she asked, as she brought herself up, leaning back on her palms.

“Murtagh,” he explained, thumb swiping across the screen as he called the number back. “He wouldn’t be calling this many times if it wasn’t important.’

He ran his free hand up and down her thigh, eyes running over her face, delighting at the novelty of being able to stare at her and not having to hide it. Murtagh answered after one ring.

“Christ,” came the burly Scottish rumble over the line. ‘Been gettin’ yer beauty sleep there, Princess?”

“I wasna sleepin’,” he said, smirking down at Claire. “What’s up?”

“I need ye down at the station in the next thirty minutes.”

The smile dropped from Jamie’s face. “What — but why?”

“I’ll explain when ye get here.”

“But it’s my day off!” Jamie whined, unashamed. “And Claire and I — we—”

He stopped when Claire arched a coy brow at him, squeezing his hips a little with her parted thighs.

“Oh aye?” Murtagh asked, mockingly cheerful. “Well, how nice. Ye can tell me all about it when ye get here.”

“But—”
“Just for an hour or so, Jesus,” he grumbled. “Yer cock’ll still work fine by the time ye get back.”

Jamie clicked off the phone and slammed it down on the counter, pouting like a petulant teenager. Claire leaned in, took his protruding lower lip between her teeth, and tugged hard.

“Christ…” he gasped, hands gripping her hips, tugging her forward until she was pressed tight up against him, ankles hooking behind his back.

She tucked her face into his neck. “Don’t go.”

“He said it wouldna be long…” he said helplessly, pressing a kiss to her shoulder, pulling away from the counter.

Her legs only tightened around his waist, arms like little iron bars around his neck, so that even as he walked away from the counter with his hands by his sides, she stayed wrapped around him.

“Claire…” he laughed fondly, arms wrapping around her at the middle of her back.

His face felt like it hurt from smiling, even more so as she shook her head, making a little “nuh-uh” sound into his neck. With a sigh of false exasperation, he flopped down on to the couch with her straddling his lap. Taking two firm handfuls of her arse, he urged her into a hard, rolling grind.

“Can we just… you know?” she mumbled into his mouth. “Really quick.”

The grin, if it was possible, stretched wider across his face. “Ye greedy wee thing.”

More than anything else, he wanted to shut his phone off. He wanted to push her little shorts to the side, slip out his cock, and let her roll down over him, feel her all around him, finally find out if she was as tight and warm as he dreamed she’d be. But more than anything, he wanted it to be good for her. Wanted to show her that he could be good for her. Because even after all he’d seen, all he’d done, there was still enough of him left to love her and that had to be worth something.
If it was anyone else but Murtagh calling, he would have turned off his phone, shut out the world, and lost himself in her. But he owed the man everything, including his job, and so he’d go.

And yet, he couldn’t leave her wanting. He was watching her, feeling her roll against him and losing himself in the focused way she bit her lip, her brow furrowed as she watched him back. Listened to the small breathless sounds she made when he moved his grip up toward her hips, changing her angle and rolling her down harder. He wanted to hear more.

“Will ye touch yerself for me Claire?”

Her eyes went wide, and her cheeks flushed so sweet and pink, he felt himself growing harder in his shorts.

She pouted a little, though she was definitely aroused by the prospect. “But I want you to touch me.”

“I will,” he promised, running his hands up her sides. “When I’ve the time to do it properly.”

“But—”

“Lass, if I start touching ye now, I won’t stop. Here—”

He reached behind his neck, grabbed one of the hands buried there at his nape, and brought it around to his mouth. Got a few of her fingers in his mouth, and sucked hard. She watched with blown pupils, whimpering as his tongue flicked between her fingers. Slowly, he pushed her hand down between them, tucking them under the waistband of her shorts.

He waited, nodding encouragingly as her flush deepened. Waited for her to shake that last little bit of self-consciousness and push her hand down deeper. Waited for her fingers to find the right spot, the right rhythm, until her hips started rolling over him again. And then he moved his hands back to her arse, taking a hard grip and urging her on.

It was so close to the real thing — and at the same time, such a pitiful imitation — he wanted to scream. The material of their gym clothes too thin, too little of a barrier between them, and he was painfully aware of how wet she was. How wet she was for him.
That thought alone was doing dangerous things to him, making him growl into her mouth as he rolled her harder, needing her completion as though it were his own. Their mouths broke apart, like she couldn’t focus on kissing anymore, resting her forehead against him and panting down over his face.

“C’mon,” he groaned, hating the way she was biting her lip, like she was trying to keep quiet. “Let me hear ye, Lass.”

He brought his grip higher, pressed down harder, arching his own hips up so that the outline of his cock dug into her at just the right angle.

She made that little hitching sound against his mouth again, like her breath was coming too quick, and he decided right then that he didn’t care if this was all they ever did—that he would spend his life serving her, forgoing his own pleasure, so long as he got to hear that sound at least once a day.

“Oh g-god.” She sputtered against his mouth before her feet were tucking under his thighs, free hand fisting hard in his shirt as she tried to arch up, the iron grip of his hands keeping her from doing so.

At long last, she collapsed on top of him, limp and spent. Jamie felt the pulsing, almost painful throb of his cock, and thought it was a damn good thing she’d finished when she did, because he’d been way too close to really embarrassing himself. Claire seemed to notice this too, rolling down on him again, ignoring his grunt of protest and frowning when his hands tightened on her, keeping her still.

“But you’re still—”

“It’ll keep Sassenach,” he assured her, kissing the frown, tugging at a pink lower lip with his teeth.

He stood up with her still in his arms, kissed her one more time, and then turned, dropping her back down onto the couch with a yelp and a thump.

*******

Dressed in his police uniform, Claire-tousled hair combed back into a somewhat respectable state, Jamie all but jogged into the station, eager to see Murtagh and get whatever this was over with so that he could get back to his flat and the woman he left in it.
He crossed the bull pen and entered the Captain’s Office to find a man— not Murtagh — sitting behind the desk.

“Jamie.” The tall, blonde man smiled pleasantly. “Thank you for coming.”

Jamie immediately saw red, eyes flashing to Murtagh who stood at the wall off to the side, before flitting back to the man at the desk.

“Och, now ye’ve really got to be kidding me,” he seethed, furious. “Ye didna just have me haul my arse in here for this—”

“Oi!” Murtagh barked. “I’ll remind ye where ye are and who yer talkin’ to lad. Sit. Down.”

Jamie continued glaring at the two men as he obediently took a seat in one of the rickety visitors chairs.

“Good to see you again too, Mr. Fraser,” the man said, still polite.

Jamie scowled back. “What d’ye want Harry?”

“That’s Colonel Grey, to you,” the man barked, smile falling away.

They stared at one another for a long, tense silence, until Murtagh finally sighed in exasperation.

“Well let’s get on w’ it then.”

Grey leaned back in the desk chair, hands clasped behind his head. “I suppose I can assume you’ve not reconsidered my proposal since last we spoke.”

“Impressive, Colonel,” Jamie sneered. “Must be that MI6 intuition.”
Undeterred, Grey just rolled his eyes. “You do realize that once we eventually bring him down, everyone around him will be criminally culpable. You might want to get on our side before it’s too late.”

The threat there was not well-veiled, and Jamie almost wanted to feel sorry for the man and the pitiful hope he had for his cause. Almost.

“I dinna think I need to worry,” he said calmly. “Like I told you last time, you are never, ever, going to catch him.”

“Maybe not alone. But with your help?” Grey laughed, incredulous. “My god, Fraser! He groomed you for 13—almost 14 years! You were going to be his heir!”

Jamie growled in frustration, running a hand through his hair, not understanding how they could keep having this same conversation over and over and this guy still not get it.

“Exactly, which means that I ken him better than any of the top secret units ye’ve got investigating him, aye?”

He watched Grey’s expression, observing the shift of his eyes, and saw it was a complete surprise to him that Jamie—and, by extension, Colum—knew about the top secret units at MI6. The naivete of the man made him want to scream.

“And what I can tell ye is this. Colum Mackenzie is the best in the world at what he does.”

“What does he do, exactly?” Murtagh asked from his place on the wall, cocking his head to one side. “I’ve never been all the way clear on that.”

Jamie sighed, feeling drained and not at all up to describing the complex, genius, and downright evil nature of his Uncle’s business.

Giving up, he simply threw his hands up wide on either side. “Whatever the fuck he wants.”
Not one to give up, Grey leaned forward, forearms resting on the desk.

“Jamie, listen,” he said hopefully. “I really think now might be the right time. The Saudis—”

“The Saudis? The fuckin’ Saudis?” Jamie’s eyebrows were at his hairline as he laughed out loud. This guy was never going to get it. “Oh Christ man, ye think they’re your golden ticket for bringing Mackenzie Corp to its knees?”

He kept laughing, knowing he looked mad, and felt a little mad too because they’d had this conversation way too many times. Jamie didn’t know what to say to make Colonel Harold Grey see reality for what it was. See what it had taken Jamie nearly 14 years to see—that the only thing that was going to stop Colum Mackenzie was death of old age, and hell, sometimes Jamie didn’t even think that was a guarantee.

Sobering, he gave Grey his best thousand-yard stare, wishing he could show the man what he’d seen, just so that he would understand. Yet Jamie was glad he couldn’t, because really, he wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

“He owns them Grey. Just like he owns the Somalis, the Libyans, and anyone else ye think might help ye. He’s untouchable. Accept it.”

Grey nodded, rising to his feet. “I can see this was a waste of time.”

“Aye, that it was,” Jamie said flatly.

Without another word, Murtagh and Jamie were left alone.

“Dinna look at me like that,” Murtagh rumbled, moving to to his rightful spot at the chair behind the desk, clearly uncomfortable with Jamie’s seering stare, laced with betrayal.

When he still didn’t say anything, the older man threw his hands up, helpless. “What’d ye expect me to do? The man’s a Colonel, Jamie. He called me, asked me to bring ye in. I couldn’t say no.”

“Ye could’ve warned me.”
"Would ye’ve come if I did?"

Jamie didn’t answer that, only looking away, trying to take deep breaths and calm down. Wanting to shake the stench of this meeting before he left the station, before he went home to Claire. And Christ, at just the mention of her name in his thoughts—

“What is it?” he asked, suddenly noticing that Murtagh was watching him, concerned.

“Just… somethin’ Grey said.” He paused, furrowing his bushy black brows in thought before going on. “I ken ye dinna like to talk about the past. Ye’ve no’ told me what it is ye did while ye worked for him, and I’ve never asked. But don’t ye think…”

“What?”

“Grey said he groomed ye? For wh— how long?”

“From the day he won custody from Mam, I suppose.” Jamie winced as the mention of his mother left his lips. “Back when I was fifteen.”

Murtagh nodded, pressing forward. “When ye came to me a year ago, said ye needed out, ye told me that yer Uncle let ye go by choice.”

Jamie nodded. “Aye.”

“He spent all that time grooming ye, teaching ye how to run the business, and then he just…” Murtagh trailed off, frowning, “lets ye go?”

Jamie nodded again, unsure where this was going.

“Makes me think…”
“What?”

Murtagh sighed, leaning back in his chair, shrugging. “Maybe he isna done with ye yet after all.”

******

“And then what happened?” Geillis asked, sounding gripped with anticipation through the phone.

“His captain called, something came up at the station. He said it wouldn’t be long though.”

Claire sighed in disappointment, though in reality, she couldn't keep the smile off of her face. The second the door had shut behind Jamie, she’d flopped backwards onto the couch, grinning up at the ceiling like a fool and way too relieved to care.

*It’s not just me*, she thought. *Thank God.*

After that she wandered around the flat, straightening up absentmindedly as she talked to Geillis, feeling like she wasn’t going to be able to stand the wait for him to get back.

“What do ye think it means for you two?”

Claire was unloading the dishwasher when she froze, glass in hand, halfway to the cabinet. She hadn’t had time to think about that yet. She knew exactly how she wanted things to be between them — and after that morning, was pretty sure he wanted the same thing. And yet…

She sighed, putting the glass back in the cabinet.

“I don’t know. Everything’s always so… fragile with him somehow,” she frowned. “I’m always afraid I’m going to push too far and scare him away.”

Over the phone, Geillis snorted. “He’s a grown man, Claire. If he canna handle a simple conversation, he’s not worth the trouble.”
Claire pursed her lips, considering Geillis’s comment while she straightened the kitchen counter. Stacking the mail into piles and brushing off errant crumbs, she came to a notepad hidden halfway behind the coffee pot. It was a list of some kind, every item scratched out, with little notes off to the side.

*Hamilton Tickets?* — *over the top*

*New Scrubs?* asked G, hospital issued scrubs, suggested something called *a bath bomb*

*A scented candle?* — this one was scratched out but didn’t give a reason.

“Does he ken?” Geillis asked, tearing her attention away from the list. It was written in Jamie’s hand, but she couldn’t figure out what in the world he’d made it for.

“Does he ken that yer… ye know?”

Claire’s cheeks burned as she recalled the secret she’d drunkenly divulged to Geillis and Louise the night before.

“Oh, um.” She stammered, stuffing the notepad in the drawer designated for miscellaneous items. “No, I haven’t gotten around to that yet.”

“Why not?”

She rolled her eyes. “Because it’s embarrassing.”

“It’s no’ that embarrassing— oh shite, I lost track of the time. Look, I gotta get back to work. Enjoy the rest of your birthday, okay?”

“Oh yeah,” Claire blinked, realizing that it was her 22nd birthday. With everything that’d happened, she’d almost completely forgotten. “Thanks.”
Twenty minutes later, Claire was just stepping out of the shower when she heard the door to the studio open. Her heart lifted, eager to see Jamie and to talk — to finally, finally do something — before it fell again, hearing the click of high heels against the hardwood floors.

“Hello?” came a woman’s voice, all sing-songy and posh, ringing through the flat.

Claire stood frozen in the bathroom, wrapped in a towel and still dripping, having no idea what to do.

“Darling, it’s me!” came the voice, this time just outside the bathroom door. “I know you’re in there.”

*Darling.* She really thought she might throw up. Slowly, Claire opened the door to reveal a tall, leggy brunette, dressed in a tight black pencil skirt and crisp white button up. She looked older, probably closer to Jamie’s age. She looked (literally) down her nose at Claire, sizing her up.

“Oh,” she said flatly. “Who are you?”

Claire said nothing and only stood there, wrapped in a towel, feeling small and stupid. First the blonde from the coffee shop, and now this woman—with her glossy brown hair and long legs. It hit her all at once, how little she knew about Jamie—how little of his life he was willing to share with her.

“Ah,” the woman sneered, mouth quirking up in an evil smirk. “You must be the flavor of the month.”

She cocked her head to one side, appraising. “You’re a bit younger than he usually goes for, but then again,” she laughed, “who doesn’t he go for?”

Still, Claire said nothing, all of her mental energy focused on not bursting into tears.

“No worries,” she shrugged as if she hadn’t a care in the world — as if she hadn’t just shattered Claire’s heart into a million pieces. “Tell him I stopped—on second thought, I’ll tell him myself.”
She was already whipping out her cell phone.

“Lovely meeting you.”
A Case Of You

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday! As a reminder posting schedule changes next week and I’ll be updating less frequently.

A/n: Some of you who read the original incarnation of this story might be a little confused. I’ve included a clarification at the end of the chapter.

Despite the frustration wrought by the conversation with Grey, as well as the ominous cloud of Murtagh’s observation, Jamie was in an incredibly good mood. He couldn’t remember the last time he smiled for no reason. He’d have to say that his last genuine smile had been with his Da the day before he died as they laughed together, working on that dumb old pickup. During his years with Colum, all of his smiles had a purpose: smile to charm, to manipulate, to ensnare, to seduce. None of those smiles were him, not really. And then, he met a curly-haired Sassenach in line at a coffee house and she had a smile on his face — wide and real— within seconds.

He was just now leaving that same coffee house with a paper bag full of special birthday muffins, turning in the direction back towards his flat, when his phone started to ring. He frowned down at the screen, not recognizing the number.

“Hello?”

“Alex.”

He briefly stopped walking in surprise, both at the alias he hadn’t gone by in years and at the voice that was calling him by it, before rolling his eyes and ambling along cautiously. “What d’ye want Geneva?”

“Well, I was just in the city. Thought I’d stop by so we could catch up.”

He scowled, wondering how he’d ever managed to stand that whiny, too-posh voice, even if it had only just been a job. “I’m busy.”
“Yes,” she snickered. “I can see that.”

That had him stopping in his tracks, color draining from his face. “What?”

“She’s cute.”

His breath started to come shorter, quicker. “What the fuck did you—”

“Call me when you get bored with that one, alright Alex?”

He felt sick, absolutely fucking sick, dropping the bag of muffins on the ground as he tore off frantically down the street dressed in his police uniform, for the second time in a month. If he’d been in a more humorous mood, he would’ve observed that Claire Beauchamp was earning him something of a reputation in the Kensington neighborhood.

********

Claire was still shaking, hair still dripping from the messy bun she’d quickly knotted on top of her head, dressed in the first clothes she found. She was scampering about the studio, gathering only the most basic essentials. She didn’t know how much time she had before Jamie got back, but she didn’t want to risk it. Geillis or Louise could come back for the rest. She also didn’t know what her plan was, where she was going to go — whether she would risk it at her own flat or go to Geillis’ or Joe’s, she just knew she had to get out of there. The memories of the past few weeks, mixing evilly with the echo of that woman’s voice, strangled her with betrayal and shame.

She dug through the top shelf of his closet, looking for the jumper she’d stored there, fingers closing around the sharp edges of a box. She closed her hand around it and brought it down to see that it was a present. Wrapped clumsily in plain brown paper, a gift tag bearing Claire’s name— written in Jamie’s hasty scrawl — hanging off the white gift bow. Hot tears filled her eyes as she blinked down at it before she threw it across the room with a strangled curse. Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she gathered up the overstuffed tote bag she’d filled with the things she’d deemed essential and all but ran for the door.

Out in the hall, she slammed at the elevator call button repeatedly, cursing when the doors didn’t open immediately, every little delay in her departure feeling like an obstacle intentionally placed by some cruel force in the universe.
“Come on!” she wailed, hitting the button again and again.

Once finally downstairs, she crossed the lobby on quick feet, stepping out onto the crowded street, feeling her stomach drop when—

“Claire!” He was running towards her, all but shoving people out of the way.

She turned on her heel, hot tears pooling in her eyes, thinking yet again how unfair it was that he was so big — that he was wearing his stupid cop’s uniform, that people cleared paths for him easily, while she was left to work through the throngs at a much slower pace. He caught up to her within a minute.

He put a hand on her shoulder trying to stop her, trying to turn her back towards him.

“Stay away from me!” she snarled at him, jerking her shoulder back and trying to walk forward.

“Claire, wait, ye dinna—” He grabbed her arm again, and she pulled it away roughly, walking faster.

“STOP!” He roared and everyone within a twenty foot radius did just that.

Okay, Claire thought, as she glanced around at all the people staring at them. The uniform really isn’t fair. Because how could she run away from him now, without looking like a fugitive?

She couldn’t, and so she stalked back towards him, glaring at him the entire way. Eventually, the world started turning again, and the street around them bustled back to life. Jamie took her arm and, drew her closer, even as she tried to pull away.

“Please, if ye’ll just let me—”

“Why should I?” she hissed up into his face, trying not to notice how desperate he looked — how this was the most open his face had been in the entire time she’d known him. “First, I see you in the coffee shop with some random blonde, the next minute you’ve got brunettes showing up at your flat? What’s next, you gonna bring a redhead down for drinks at the pub?”
“It’s no’ what ye think!” he insisted, trying to take her by the shoulders.

“What I think?” she balked, trying to pull back, “Jamie, the woman has a key to your apartment!”

He winced, closing his eyes, shaking his head. “I ken how it looks!” He opened his eyes again, leveling her with a pleading look that would have broken her if she wasn’t so thoroughly pissed off. “But Christ, Sassenach, I dinna give a fuck about her! Or anyone else, and if you’d just—”

He took her by the arm again, trying to tug her back towards the building. “Just come upstairs so we can talk. Please.”

“Let me go!” she snarled, getting frantic, knowing there was no way she could be in that space with him again — that space where she’d fallen in love with him, that same space where she’d realized just how foolish that was — and not sob her broken heart out in front of him.

Jamie, on the other hand, had assumed some sort of eerie calm. Something determined and sure, like that of a soldier about to go off to battle.

“I will literally throw ye over my shoulder, kickin’ and screamin’, Claire,” he warned, low and threatening.

She jerked back, stunned, before scowling at him with a steely glare. “You wouldn’t dare.”

He held her gaze, raised a challenging brow. “Try me.”

******

They went back up to the studio in complete silence. Claire looked everywhere but at Jamie, hoisting the tote bag higher up on her shoulder once they were on the elevator, jerking away from him when he tried to take it for her.

Once inside, he took the tote bag from her and tossed it carelessly to the floor. Any protest she
could’ve made was silenced when he took her by the hips and hoisted her up onto the kitchen island, near the same place where they’d been kissing that morning, so that they were nearly eye to eye. Jamie stood in front of her, not quite between her legs, hands braced on either side of her on the counter, leaning in like a great iron cage and forcing her to look at him.

He watched her face for a long time, as though memorizing every feature — as though he thought this might be the last time he saw her. A thought that made Claire’s stomach clench painfully. Even in the flurry of rage following the woman’s departure, she’d never actually considered that she might not ever see him again. She only wanted to get away from him, from his place as quickly as possible, to lick her wounds in peace.

After a long time, he took a deep breath, bringing a hand up to the ghost of her cheek, mouth tightening when she flinched. He swallowed, putting the hand back down to brace down the counter.

“Her name is Geneva Dunsany.”

Claire blinked back at him, startled after such a long silence. “Dunsany?”

She furrowed her brow, something about the name catching her attention. “Why do I feel like I know that name?”

“Because her father is the Foreign Secretary,” he said simply. “William Dunsany. Ye probably heard about him on the news.”

She had absolutely no idea what to do with that particular bit of information, so she only sat there, waiting for him to go on.

His eyes bore into hers, making some sort of plea she couldn’t decipher. Begging her to understand something he hadn’t explained yet.

“Before I started workin’ for the department, I worked for my Uncle.” His gaze dropped from hers as he dipped his head, bringing a cautious hand up to rest on her thigh. “And sometimes… I would have to— to pretend to like certain people—”

She scoffed bitterly, knocking his hand away. “Are you serious? That’s what you’re going with? That you were just pretending to like her?” She shook her head, huffing an incredulous laugh.
“Jamie, that is such a crock of—”

His head came back up then, and his eyes were filled with such unspeakable anguish, such *devastation*, that it killed the words in her throat.

“Claire. Please.”

She kept her mouth clamped tight shut, not trusting herself to speak. After a minute, he straightened up slightly as he brushed his eyes with his fists quickly — like he was hoping she wouldn’t notice.

“Fine,” he nodded, slowly. “If ye willna believe that, believe this.” His eyes were clear again when they pierced hers, compelling her acceptance of his truth. “I havena fucked Geneva in years. I’ve no’ fucked anyone since I met ye.”

He huffed a little laugh as his gaze traveled over her, almost hungry. “Havena even thought about it.”

She wanted to believe him, wanted to believe him so *badly* that it was clawing at her guts, making her sick with it. And yet, she couldn’t help but realize that she knew absolutely nothing about him. Not really. She didn’t know where he was from, other than the vague generalization of Scotland. Didn’t know if he had siblings or if his parents were still alive. The only family he’d ever mentioned was this Uncle that he’d spoken of once before, when explaining the presence of the lady from the coffee house.

Her eyes welled and she let her head fall forward a little, thinking how badly she wanted to know him, how badly she wanted him to know *her*. For a minute, she wondered how he could possibly want her the same way she wanted him. She wanted to give him everything, and he wouldn’t give her anything.

“Are ye cryin’?” he asked, tenderly tilting her head back up.

She shrugged, feeling pitiful. “Does it matter?”

His face seemed to crumple a little bit at that. “Of course it *matters*.”
He tried to pull her into him and was met instead with her hand pressing hard into his chest, keeping him away.

“She has a key to your flat.” A question. A challenge.

He nodded, sighed, turned to the drawer by the fridge where he kept important documents. Pulling out a thick packet, he turned back to her and placed it into her hands. It was a lease — his lease — and at the top was a logo that read *Dunsany Properties.*

“She has a key to your flat.”

“Her family owns the building. I needed a place quickly when I first moved here. Geneva was living in New York at the time. Didn’t seem likely she’d be dropping by, and…” he shrugged. “It didn’t seem to matter much at the time. It was just me then.”

She looked down at the lease, eyes narrowing on the line labeled TENANT NAME.

“What do ye need to hear, Claire?”

Her eyes flicked back to him, unsure what he was asking.

“Do ye need to hear that I’m so crazy over ye that the thought of even touchin’ another woman makes me sick to my stomach?” he asked roughly. “Because it’s true.”

She blinked, shaking her head, taken aback by the bluntness of his words. “I don’t—I don’t know.”

He waited patiently as she she struggled to form words.
“I feel like I don’t even know you,” she whispered, lower lip trembling. “You won’t tell me anything, and when you do it’s always because you have to.”

He made a strangled sound deep in his throat, moving away from her. He plopped down on the couch, head falling forward into his hands.

“I’m scared, Claire,” he whispered, voice cracking painfully. “I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

She regarded him cautiously, slipping down off the kitchen counter, leaning back against it and folding her arms.

“What are you scared of?” she asked.

“I tried so hard not to want ye, ye ken. But I couldna help it,” he laughed a little bitterly.

Swallowing thickly, running a hand through his hair. “I have a past. And it’s no’ a pretty one.”

She heard the agony in his voice, knew it was real. It was another piece of the puzzle that was Jamie, falling into place. A piece that somehow led to other pieces suddenly emerging from the woodwork of her mind.

*How he always took ice cold showers.*

*How his flat was sparse, containing few, if any, superfluous possessions.*

*How they’d be out shopping together and his eyes would light up at something, like a good bottle of whisky, or a silly pair of James Bond cufflinks.*

How she’d urge him to treat himself, only for him to quickly change the subject.

Cautiously, she approached him where he sat on the couch, perching on the edge of the coffee table, facing him.
“I ken that if I tell ye… if I tell ye....” He took a deep shuddering breath. “Ye’ll leave me. And I…” His voice broke as his head fell forward, down into his hands.

She watched him for a long time, realizing that for as bad as the whole thing looked, she still trusted him. There was a goodness about him, something that couldn’t be faked.

After a long silence, he looked up, eyeing her warily. “Aren’t ye going to say anything?”

“I’m thinking.”

He stared at her. “About?”

“I’m trying to decide if there’s anything you could tell me that would make me want to leave you,” she said, screwing her mouth up as she continued to think. Only half-thinking about it really, curious if there was actually anything, even though deep down she knew there wasn’t.

“Nope.” She shrugged at last. “I’ve got nothing.”

Jamie arched a dubious brow at her. “You seemed pretty ready to leave a few minutes ago.”

“Because I was mad at you, not because I don’t lo—” she stopped, closing her mouth tight. Too much, too soon. Don’t say it, don’t think it. If Jamie noticed her almost slip up, he didn’t let on.

“Not because I didn’t want to be with you,” she finished instead, leaning forward to take one of his hands. “I won’t leave you, Jamie.”

He shook his head, “Dinna make that kind’ve promise, Claire. Ye dinna—”

“How about this? I promise that I will always give you a chance to explain. No matter what.”
He smirked at her. “Like ye did today?”

“Technically, yes.”

He huffed a laugh, leaning back. “Not until I threatened ye with physical force.”

Suddenly, his mouth screwed up in confusion, hips arching up, arm snaking down under him, like he was sitting on something. His arm came back up with the present Claire had hurled across the room earlier.

“Oh.” Her cheeks burned. “I found that while I was packing my things. I was mad so…I sort’ve threw it across the room.”

“Aye?” he snorted. “Just as well, I suppose. I decided this mornin’ to get ye something else.”

He quirked his mouth up on one side.

“This—” he held the box up in his hand, shaking it a little— “was a huge miss.”

She couldn’t help but smile, biting her lip as she tried to hide it. “I want to open it.”

“No, Claire, it’s stupid.” He looked down, shaking his head.

In the end, he let her pry it out of his hands. She ripped away the paper to reveal that it was a tiny pink taser. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked down at it, so full of feeling for this thoroughly practical man who cared about her safety so much it was almost ridiculous.

“I did tons of research, and this one’s the top of the line,” he told her, quickly, earnestly, as though he were trying to talk her out of hating it. “It’s got long battery life, and a wee flashlight built in, and—”

He stopped when she looked up, grinning at him. “Pink?”
“Aye.” He blushed adorably. “I thought it would match yer wee scrubs.”

“I’m sorry it’s no’ verra romantic,” he said quietly after another moment.

“It’s perfect,” she told him, meaning it, before setting the box beside her on the coffee table.

Turning back towards him, she hesitated only a moment before climbing onto his lap. She put her hands on his chest, wanting so badly to put the unpleasantness of the morning behind her, but unable to shake those lingering insecurities.

“What is it?” he asked her, hands braced on her thighs, steadying her.

“Geneva.” Claire bit her lip, looking away. “She said…”

“What? What did she say?”

“She called me the flavour of the month,” she grunted out, not looking at him.

“I’m sure she did,” he said harshly, shrugging. “She’s a bitch.”

She rolled her eyes. “Jamie.”

“Claire—”

“What if she comes back?” she blurted finally, feeling inarticulate, saying the first thing that came to mind. “How do I know that she wasn’t telling the truth about you?”

Clearly coming to some sort of decision, Jamie reached down into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. After he dialed, he put it on speaker.
There came an answer after three rings. “Foreign Office.”

“Put me through to Mr. Peters, please,” he said robotically, tracing lazy circles on Claire’s thigh.

There was a click, followed by a long silence, and then—

“This is Peters.”

“I need to speak with the Secretary,” he said simply.

She stared at him, thinking he’d well and truly lost his mind.

“He’s not available at the moment. May I ask who—”

Jamie cut him off, impatient. “Tell him it’s an old friend from home.”

There was a long, stunned pause on the other line. Clearly Jamie had just used some kind of code, because to her the message didn’t seem nearly that ominous.

“Are you sure, sir?”

“Do it.”

Another click, another long silence, and then—

“Hello?”

Claire balked down at the phone, realizing that she was hearing the voice of none other than Foreign Secretary William Dunsany.
“William, how are you?”

William? She thought, incredulously. Jamie calls him William?

“Fine,” came the nervous reply after a long pause.

“Good to hear,” Jamie said back, using a voice she’d never heard before. A voice that scared her a little — a voice that didn’t fit the man she knew. “I’m afraid we’ve got a problem, Will.”

“We do?”

“Aye. You have any idea how Geneva got a key to my flat?”

“She what?” the voice sputtered. “No—no!”

“Find out who gave her one. Sack them,” he said ruthlessly, reaching out to play with a piece of Claire’s hair. “Call the building property manager, I want my locks changed immediately.”

The voice hesitated, and then: “yes, of course.”

“Make sure she knows that if she ever comes anywhere near me or my flat again, she’ll regret it,” he paused, “and I think it goes without saying that you will too.”

“Really, I don’t know how she—”

“And another thing,” Jamie went on. “It seems when she was here, she made some very unkind remarks to my girlfriend. I’ll be expecting a note from Geneva, to Claire, expressing her sincere regrets.”

Claire very nearly jumped out of his lap, and she would have had it not been for the hard grip of Jamie’s hand on her thigh. Her head was spinning, both from the nature of the conversation she was observing as well as the fact that Jamie had just referred to her as his girlfriend.
The voice coughed. “Is that really nec—”

“Or maybe just forget it all,” Jamie shrugged, voice low and threatening. “I’ll give the Prime Minister a call and we’ll have a little chat about that incident in Bermuda.”

The voice sighed, sounding defeated. “Alright, alright, whatever you want.”

Jamie clicked off the phone and tossed it aside.

Claire stared at him, mouth open. “What the hell was that?”

“I want ye, Claire,” he said simply, holding her gaze fiercely, “and I’m willing to do anything, whatever it takes, to keep you.”

“Now,” he leaned in, pressing his lips to her forehead before shoving her gently off his lap, “let me make ye some lunch.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: In a previous version of this fic, Geneva was the woman Jamie saw in the coffee house. In this current version, the woman Jamie saw in the coffee house was Annalise.

Thanks for reading!
Robert Horrocks looked up from the table where he was playing a game of solitaire with grungy, age stained cards, to see one of the guards coming towards him.

“Bail hearing’s in an hour.” The guard said. “You should probably get cleaned up.”

Horrocks frowned, rising from the table. “My lawyer said it wasn’t til Monday.”

“Got moved up.”

“Why?”

The guard shrugged. “No idea. Get moving.”

An hour and twenty minutes later he was standing in a courtroom.

“Bail is set at 50,000 pounds.” The judge declared with a bang of his gavel.

Well that was a waste of time, Horrocks thought bitterly to himself. No one he knew had that kind of money. Outside, the guard was just leading him towards the van that would take him back to the jail, when another guard came chasing after them.

“Wait, don’t take him back.” The new guard said. “He just made bail.”
Horrocks stared back blankly. “I did?”

Without further explanation, he was handed off to a new guard and shuffled down a different hallway. He racked his brain, trying to think how anyone he knew could’ve managed 50,000 pounds on such short notice. He was left to wonder in silence, as he was lead to waiting area near the door of the court house.

Ten minutes later, he was being shoved into the rear facing seat of a black town car. Across from him sat a tall, dark haired man in a dark suit. Next to him, a shorter, but equally sturdy looking blond man.

The dark haired man spoke first. “Mr. Horrocks.”

Horrocks only blinked back at him, having no earthly idea what was going on.

“My name is Colum Mackenzie. This is my associate Stephen Bonnet.”

Horrocks nodded, cautiously. “You bailed me out?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

Colum didn’t answer, only looked out the window peering at people on the street. “Very interesting scheme you’re running on the east end.”

He turned back to Horrocks, smiling pleasantly. “As you know, it’s getting harder and harder to get your hands on high quality painkillers these days. When I’m abroad, it’s much easier. However I’m afraid I’m stuck in England for the time being. Family business.”

He nodded his head over at the man called Stephen. “My associate here thought he could imitate your process, and I didn’t see a problem with letting him have a go. He’s a former street rat so that
kind’ve thing is fun for him. I, however, am a businessman, and prefer things to be as easy as they can be.”

“What’s this about?” Horrocks blurted, feeling anxious and impatient. “You guys want in or somethin’? Cause I already got a partner.”

Colum laughed. “No, lad I’m not a drug dealer. Like I said, I’m a businessman. I have a chronic pain condition, for which I require pain medication.”

Horrocks considered this. “Why not just get a prescription?”

“Prescriptions leave a paper trail.” Colum shrugged, as though this were obvious. “I try to avoid those where I can.”

He nodded, still nervous. “So what, you want to buy drugs from me?”

Colum tilted his head to one side, blue, cat-like eyes narrowed. “I think I just did. 50,000 pounds worth.”

Horrocks stiffened. “My stash isn’t worth that—”

“Relax, Mr. Horrocks.” Colum laughed. “I don’t need it all at once. I’m not a junkie. I just like to have them on hand, in case of flare ups. My people will be in touch with you when I need one of your products. We’ll just consider this a running arrangement until I say otherwise.”

Horrocks only nodded, trying to say as little as possible. He just wanted to get out of this car and away from this man. He knew how to hide from people. Surely he could hide from this man easily enough.

Colum was watching him and it almost seemed as though he could read Horrocks’ thoughts. He held out a hand towards Stephen and snapped his fingers. An instant later, Stephen produced a thick manilla file folder. Colum took out a pair of tortoiseshell spectacles and perched them on his nose, opening the file.

“Your mother really is a handsome woman, ye know that?” He said, looking down at the file.
Horrocks started. “My mother?”

“Yes.” Colum nodded.

He pulled a blown up photograph out of the file and handed it to Horrocks. It was his mother, unloading groceries from her car.

“Lives in a lovely little cottage over in Dublin. But, of course you knew that. You call her at least once a week. She must be important to you.”

Horrocks looked up to see Colum staring at him with an eerily blank expression.

“As a thank you, for your cooperation, I have men posted outside her home. For her protection, of course.” He assured Horrocks. “Just thought I’d let you know, should ye get any ideas about vanishing on me, or worse, using this conversation as leverage with the police.”

He tilted his head to one side in a way that made Horrocks’ stomach drop. “It would be dreadfully rude of you, in the face of such generosity on my part.”

Horrocks could do nothing but stare back, holding the photograph in shaking hands.

“I think this is you.” Colum said, taking back the photograph.

“Have a good day, Mr. Horrocks.”

******

Jamie could hear Claire thinking from where he stood frying bacon at the stove. He’d changed out of his police uniform and now wore jeans and a long sleeve cotton t-shirt. She sat across from him on one of the stools at the kitchen island, watching him.
“Something on yer mind, Lass?”

She didn’t answer at first, only continued to watch him.

“A couple things.” She finally said.

He shrugged. “Shoot.”

“What the hell was that?” She blurted.

“What?” He asked, looking up at her innocently.

“Y-you just called the Foreign Secretary.” She sputtered, throwing her hands up. “Like it wasn’t a big deal.”

“So?”

She glared at him. “I should remind you, James Fraser, that there are several sharp objects in this kitchen.”

He snorted. “Ye ken it’s a crime to threaten bodily harm on an officer of the law?”

She scoffed in frustration and he sighed, realizing that playful banter wasn’t going to cut it this time. He removed the last piece of bacon from the pan and left it on the plate to cool before coming around to her at her stool.

“Claire.” He said, boosting up on the stool next to her. Turning towards her, he took one of her hands. “I ken ye’re confused and suspicious. Ye have a right to be. I would tell ye everything now, but believe me when I say it would overwhelm ye.”

Whisky eyes searched blue, trying desperately to understand.
“But—”

“I told ye that I was scared, Sassenach.” He said quietly. “But I dinna ken if that’s the right word for it. Truth be told, I’m petrified.”

He looked down at her hand, playing with her tiny, cold fingers, marvelling at how smooth and soft they were. Wondered how it could be that literally every part of her body was perfect. Wondered not for the first time if she was some sort’ve angelic being sent down from heaven by God just to test him.

He sighed. “I ken ye think now that ye won’t leave, and I want to believe ye. “

A sharp intake of breath. “You don’t trust me?”

He looked up, shaking his head earnestly. “Trust has got nothing to do with it, Lass. Of course I trust ye.”

A hand came up to cup her cheek and she leaned into his touch, almost unconsciously.

“I’ve no’ had much to be happy about it my life. And I was okay with that. I could get by. One day at a time. But now, I dinna think I can go back to that. I canna go back to life before ye.”

He shook his head, feeling daft, feeling as though he’d said too much too soon, as he hopped back down from the stool. Over at the fridge, he collected the rest of the ingredients he needed. Sliced turkey from the deli, a juicy red tomato, a head of lettuce and a jar of mayonnaise. After a quick pass by the sink to wash the vegetables, he set himself up with a cutting board at a counter opposite the island, facing away from her, and started slicing the tomatoes. It was a long time before he spoke again.

“It would just, make me feel better, if we had a little time to get to know one another first. Spend a little more time together. I guess what I’m saying is…”

He knifed off a few more slices, trying to focus on not getting one of his fingers, as he searched for the right words.
“Just give me a little more time, Sassenach.”

*If I can make her love me, really love me, before I tell her, maybe she willna leave.*

*Don’t kid yourself, Fraser. You’re a monster, and you don’t deserve*—

The voice stopped, seeming to evaporate from his mind, and he felt tiny cold arms wrap around his middle. Felt a soft, warm cheek press against his back. One of the things he loved most about being around Claire, was the way she was always touching him. She was always eager to have her hands on him. To run a cherishing hand through his hair, nails scraping against his scalp. To press a soft, warm palm against his thigh.

Before Claire, how long had it been since someone touched him in tenderness? Held him in comfort?

He didn’t have to think long. He knew.

Finished with the tomatoes, he grabbed the lettuce.

“What’re you making?” Came a small voice, muffled by his shirt.

“Club sandwiches.” He said casually, and got what he wanted. A sweet, little excited squeeze from the arms around his waist, and the feeling of a smile curving against his back.

“My favorite.”

“Aye.” He grinned, pleased with himself. “It is yer birthday after all.”

Her face pulled away from his back, almost in surprise. “That’s right. It is my birthday.”

She left him then, he turned his head a little to watch her move behind the kitchen island, boosting herself up back on a stool. Finished with the vegetables, he reached up into the cupboard, and pulled out a loaf of white bread.
“And I think I know what I want.”

He snorted, popping a few slices into the toaster before he turned to face her, leaning back against the counter.

“I thought ye already opened yer gift?” He pointed out, arching a brow.

“I did.” She shrugged. “But you said you were already planning to get me something different. I don’t know why, I thought the taser was perfect.”

“Well, if it was so perfect then—”

“Questions. I get questions.” She said. “22 of them.”

“22?” He asked, turning as four slices of perfectly goldened bread popped up from the toaster.

“22 questions for 22 years.” She explained

“You’re 22?” He stopped, taken off guard. Turning back to her, he arched a brow.

He’d known she was younger than him, of course, but she had such a strong, impressive presence about her, it was easy to forget.

“Yes.” She said, as this though this were a well established fact. “How old did you think I was?”

“I dinna ken,” he shrugged, before turning back to his work. He popped four more slices into the toaster, before setting to spread mayonnaise on the finished slices.

“Does that bother you?” She asked, sounding more curious than anxious.
“No,” he answered honestly.

He was just finished assembling the first sandwich, sticking an over sized toothpick through it, when the second four slices popped up from the toaster.

“So, Lass, are ye thinkin’ about yer 20 questions?”

“22.” She corrected.

“No’ by my count,” he said, turning towards her with a wink. “Ye’ve already used two.”

She paused, narrowed her eyes as though she was replaying the last few minutes, and then snorted in annoyed laughter.

“No, you dick, the game hasn’t started yet,” She rolled her eyes. “You didn’t agree.”

“Aye, well.”

He assembled the second sandwich in silence. When he was finished, he came over to stand at the island across from her.

“Alright. 22 questions,” he conceded, cautiously. “But I get passes.”

She pursed her lips. “How many?”

“10.”

She considered this for a long moment. “You can have five.”

He laughed, stretching an arm out across the island. “You’ve got yerself a deal, Ms. Beauchamp.”
“Where are you from?” She asked as he turned back to the sandwiches.

“A wee town called Broch Mordha, a few miles north of Inverness.”

He’d just answered her first question when he started wrapping the sandwiches up in brown paper.

“What are you doing?” she asked, before adding quickly: “And that doesn’t count as one of my questions!”

“We’re taking these to go, Lass,” he explained with a smirk. “If we stay here all day, ye willna be able to ask yer wee questions.”

She arched a brow at him. “Why?”

He finished wrapping the second sandwich, placing it to the side before he came around the island, leaning in towards her until his face was no more than a hairsbreadth above hers.

“Ye’ll be too busy screamin’ my name.”

He heard that little hitch of breath and smiled, just barely pressing his lips to hers before he was pulling away again, smiling even wider when he heard her mumble “such a dick” under her breath. He finished assembling their lunch—the sandwiches, four juicy apples, a bag of crisps and a couple of water bottles—and stuffed it all in to a sturdy Waitrose bag.

He made sure she was bundled up in one of his thicker jumpers, wrapping a scarf around her neck—earning an irritated arch of her brow—before slipping on a gray University of Cambridge sweatshirt. He grabbed their lunch and they set out the door, hand in hand.

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They walked at a leisurely pace towards Kensington Gardens and Claire continued to pepper him with questions.
“Do you have any siblings?”

“Aye.” He said simply.

She shot him a silent look, half warning, half pleading, not wanting to use up more of her questions on the same subject.

He smirked at her, rolling his eyes. “A sister. Jenny. She lives in Scotland.”

Satisfied, she moved on. “What do your parents do?”

Her heart clenched a little, when he saw the wince that passed over his face. He took a deep breath, and for a second, she thought he was going to use a pass.

“Da was an engineer. Mam was a teacher.” He said quietly.

_Was, she thought. Past tense._

She bit her lip, wondering if she should, even though she knew this might be her only chance.

“How did they die?” She blurted out, looking down and watching their feet as they moved across the pavement.

“Da was murdered.” He said quietly.

Claire looked up, stunned.

“A road rage incident.”
She nodded, conflicted. She hated seeing his pain, and yet she was heart-burstingly grateful that he was finally opening up to her.

“And your Mother?”

He closed his eyes briefly, shaking his head. “Pass.”

She bit her lip and nodded, trying not to take it personally.

They arrived at Kensington Gardens and set up at a picnic table near the carousel. Even though it was late October, the day was sunny, bright, and unseasonably warm. Claire unwound the scarf from her neck, setting it aside as Jamie arranged their lunch on the table. They munched companionably, watching the children and families at the carousel, while Claire thought of her next question. It was an effort, not blurring out the first thing that came to her mind. She was curious of so many things about him, but she had to be economical.

“What happened in Bermuda?” She asked, finally.

He’d been watching another park goer play fetch with his dog, and his head snapped back at her question. “What?”

“On the phone, with the Foreign Secretary you mentioned… something about the incident in Bermuda?” She said. “And that if he didn’t cooperate, you’d tell the PM about it.”

“Oh,” he said, running a hand over his mouth as he considered.

Finally, he looked down at her, lips turned up a bit in humour. “He slept with his wife.”

She started. “Who’s wife?” before shaking her head and adding, “That’s not one of my questions.”

He snorted and rolled his eyes, but didn’t fight her on it.

“The PM’s.” He said. “It was at a summit with the Americans two years ago. Secretary Dunsany and
the PM’s wife had a few too many drinks. Ended up in one of the private bungalows.”

Claire gaped at him, disbelieving. “How the hell do you know that?”

She blinked, grunted in frustration. “And that’s—”

“Not one of yer questions, Sassenach, aye,” He laughed, before taking one of the apples and holding it up to her mouth. “Here, have a bite.”

She sank her teeth into it, giggling around it as he held it for her, juice dripping, down over her lips. Once she’d taken her bite, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“It was my job to know,” He explained at last.

“When you worked for your Uncle?”

He nodded.

She quirked her mouth to one side. “What does your Uncle do, exactly?”

“He’s a businessman.”

“Well that’s annoyingly vague.” She grumbled, turning away from him.

They sat there for hours at that picnic table, talking about anything and everything. Claire put something of a dent in her question allotment, and Jamie used one more of his passes when she asked how many women he’d been with.

It was some time after five, when either of them thought to move.

“Christ is that the time?” He said, looking at his wrist watch.
“What?”

He stood up, taking her hand and bring her to her feet. “We’ve got to get home and get ready.

“For what?”

“For dinner!” He told her as he gathered up the debris from lunch, turning to throw it in a nearby rubbish bin. “I thought we could go to that place in Soho that ye like.”

While normally a night out on the town for her birthday would have sounded more than agreeable to her. But, having spent the better part of the last few hours eyeing the wide span of his shoulders, picturing her fingernails scraping over them and down his back, Claire wasn’t interested anything that didn’t exclusively involve Jamie, and a horizontal surface.

Much too hot and bothered to be moved by his thoughtfulness, she frowned. “But I thought—”

“Dinna pout, Lass.” He blink-winked, pulling her in for a searing kiss. “There’ll be plenty of time for…. Other things later.”

They were halfway back to the flat, when he pulled her into an alleyway. Pressing her up against the wall, he put a hand on either side of her head, and leaned in close.

“Tell me,” he said low, and seductive. “Do ye still have that wee black dress? The one ye wore to Joe’s birthday dinner a few weeks ago.”

“Y-yes.” She sputtered. “I think so.”

He took a long pause, letting his eyes run over her, dark and hungry.

“Ye should wear that.”
The little black dress that Claire had worn to Joe’s birthday was one that, under normal circumstances, would have never ended up in her closet. That day, Claire worked a long shift at the hospital, and didn’t manage to get off until around an hour before they were all supposed to meet and realized she’d forgotten to bring a change of clothes to the hospital. A mere two days into her living arrangement with Jamie, her clothes had been all over the place—scattered about between her flat and his studio.

In a last minute act of desperation, she’d scurried into a boutique around the corner from the hospital and bought the first thing she tried on. She was in such a rush that she didn’t realize it was a curve hugging body contour dress that rested way too high on her thighs. It was black with long sleeves and a turtleneck.

After returning to the studio from the park, she dug through the rack by the bed where she kept her clothes, looking for the dress. She put it on quickly along with a pair of lacy black stockings and stiletto heels. Just as she finished getting ready, Jamie emerged from the bathroom.

It wasn’t until this moment that she realized she’d never seen him in a suit before. He looked like a model straight out of a magazine, dressed in a navy blue suit and white button up. He’d forgone a tie, and the top few buttons of the shirt were undone. His hair was slicked down neatly with gel—another first—and she thought she smelled the faintest hint of cologne.

“Wow,” she breathed, before she could stop herself.

“Ye say something, Lass?” he asked, busy adjusting the fit of his suit jacket.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head, trying to remember how to breathe.

It was then that he finally looked up, blue eyes darkening dangerously as they ran over her. Her throat went dry and her palms felt sweaty as she stood there, trapped in the heat of his gaze.
“What do you think?” she finally asked, holding her arms out on either side.

Without saying anything, he took a few steps towards her, the look on his face unreadable. He stopped when they were just inches apart, and her neck had to crane up to look him in the eye.

“Roughly the same thing I thought the first time I saw you wearin’ this,” he said with a smirk.

“And what’s that?”

The smile that spread across his face then was real and wide and dazzling.

“Ye’re a fuckin’ smokeshow.”

She snorted, half in surprise, half in false annoyance, swatting at his chest.

“Screw off.”

He caught her hand and pulled her tight against him, captured her lips in kiss that lit the blood in her veins on fire. It was minutes before he pulled back.

“Best be on our way then,” he said, smiling down at her as she panted.

Claire frowned.

Jamie just laughed, rolling his eyes.

“C’mon, Sassenach,” he said, hand dropping to swat playfully at her arse. “The sooner we go, the sooner we get back.”

******
For Jamie, it all felt a little surreal. There was something a little thrilling about feeling—for once—like a normal guy. A normal guy walking down the street, on a first date with the woman of his dreams.

“You never did tell me where exactly we’re going.” She asked.

“I told ye, Lass. That place in SoHo that ye like so much.”

She snuggled a little closer into his arm. “I like plenty of places in SoHo, you’ll have to be more specific.”

“Bob Bob Ricard,” he told her absently, checking his watch.

She stopped walking, her hand slipping out of the crook of his arm.

“What?” she asked, looking at him with stunned, wide eyes.

He panicked, sputtering. “I thought ye said ye liked that place?”

Now ye’ve done it, ye damn fool. Ye should have asked her first, ye should have—

She shook her head, interrupting his thoughts. “Yes, but Jamie I’ve never actually been there! It’s way too expensive.”

Relieved, his shoulders sagged as he exhaled. “Dinna fash with it, Sassenach.”

He reached out, pulling her forward, tucking her into his side.

“But—”

He silenced her, leaning down to press a kiss to the corner of her mouth, making them both stumble
as they continued to walk on. Yes, it was expensive. But not unmanageable. And he wanted to do this. Wanted to take her to a fancy place, spoil her a little on her birthday. Because that’s what normal guys do when they’re in love.

“How’d you even manage to get a reservation on such short notice?” she asked a few minutes later, and Jamie couldn’t help a pleased smile as he heard the trace of excitement in her voice.

“I didn’t, technically,” he admitted. “But it won’t be a problem. The owner is a friend of mine.”

“Oh?” she asked, sounding so cute, trying to hide her rampant curiosity under an air of casualness that it was all he could do not to kiss her again. “Another connection through your Uncle?”

He shrugged. “Something like that.”

Bob Bob Ricard was a swanky, four star joint, decorated in an Art Deco style, glittering with ornate patterns of blue and gold. They walked into the lobby, straight past the waiting line of customers, and up to the maitre d’s podium.

“Mr. Fraser, how lovely to see you.” The man said, smiling warmly, collecting two menus. “Right this way.”

They were seated in a cozy, two person booth, covered in shining blue leather, in an intimate corner of the restaurant. Claire looked around, unabashed in her amazed observations.

“This place is nuts,” she blurted after a white coated waiter filled both of their glasses with expensive French champagne.

He bit his lip, trying to hide his laughter. “Glad ye like it, Sassenach.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Jamie peering over the top of his menu at Claire as she reviewed her own.

“What looks good to ye?”
“I don’t…” she mumbled, eyes wide as she took in the options. “I don’t know, Jamie, this is all really ex—”

“It’s no’ a problem,” he assured her, reaching across the table, forcing her menu down gently so that she would look up at him. “I promise.”

She smiled at him shyly. A few minutes later, she chirped up. “What would you say to sharing the Beef Wellington for two?”

“I’d say that sounds perfect.”

They ordered their dinner along with a few appetizers that had piqued Claire’s interest. Once the waiter had left, they sipped champagne and smiled at one another, not caring that they looked like a couple of lovesick teenagers.

“I’ve thought of my next question,” she declared, draining the last of her glass.

Automatically, Jamie was grabbing the bottle from the ice bucket, refilling her glass and topping off his own.

“Let’s hear it.”

“Give me a brief summary of your life, from the time you were 18 until now,” she demanded bluntly, bringing her freshly refilled glass to her lips.

He balked at her. “‘That’s cheatin’.”

“You can’t cheat on your birthday.”

He regarded her through narrowed eyes. “Ye ken I will be expecting ye to reciprocate, when my birthday comes around. And I’m older, so I get more questions.”

“Well that’s the thing, isn’t it?” she said low, tilting her head to one side in challenge. “I always
answer when you ask me things about myself. Birthday or not.”

Having nothing whatsoever to counter that with, he only stared at her, considering his next move.

“A brief summary, aye?”

She nodded as she took another sip, waiting. He leaned forward on his forearms, took a deep breath, and began to speak.

“When I was eighteen I took a gap year. Worked for my Uncle. That year, he was setting up a new office in Dubai, so I spent most of my time workin’ with that. The next year, I headed off to Cambridge. Studied linguistics. Arabic, mostly. And some Russian. Did my time there, and then went back working for my Uncle. Traveled a lot, working on different projects for the company. And then a year ago, I quit. Moved to London, and Murtagh got me the job with London PD.”

She was silent as she took in this information, swirling the bubbling gold liquid around in her glass as she thought.

“Why did you quit?”

He shrugged. “Just wanted a change.”

“Why did you want a change?”

He did the math quickly in his head, determining that he’d reached that sweet spot he’d been waiting for. The one where he had more passes than she did questions.

“Pass.”

Undeterred, she asked her next questions in a rapid succession without missing a beat.

“What kind of business does your Uncle run?”
“Pass.”

“What’s the business called?”

“Pass.”

She barked out a laugh. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You realize that was your last pass, right?”

“Aye,” he said, taking a sip, unworried.

“And I still have questions left.”

He froze.

“How do ye figure?” he asked casually as possible.

“Whenever you pass, I get a new question,” she explained with a roll of her eyes, as though this were obvious. “So I have five left.”

His eyes narrowed as he tried to recall their conversation from that morning. “When did we agree to that?”

She shrugged. “I thought it was obvious.”

“Claire—”

“Why don’t you think you deserve good things?” She blurted without warning, as though she wanted to get it out, before she could talk herself out of saying it.
That one hit him square in the chest and for just a minute he thought he might’ve hated her if he
didn’t love her so much. Might’ve hated that way she saw through the stone wall he’d erected— saw
through it as though it were glass. Saw through to the beating, pulsing core of his being. Hated it
because it felt like healing and bleeding all at once.

“Because I don’t,” he answered quietly, honestly.

She winced as though he’d just confirmed something she was hoping he’d deny, let out a soft,
distressed whimper. “Jamie—”

Reaching out, he took both her hands in his, squeezing them tight as his eyes bored into hers.

“Please, Sassenach. It’s your birthday,” he pleaded, ending on a crooked smile. “I want tonight to be
special. I promise ye, I’ll tell ye everything. But right now, I just wanna be w’ ye. Is that okay?”

She regarded him warily, though her face softened considerably when she took in the earnest set of
his eyes. “I suppose.”

“And besides,” he said with a wink, draining his glass. “Don’t ye think yer being a wee bit too
inquisitive for a first date?”

She kicked him hard in the shin, using the pointed toe of her stiletto heels to her advantage. He
yelped, jumping a little in his seat. But he didn’t care. She looked so beautiful, laughing and smiling,
surrounded by candle light and the glittering shadows of gold and blue. Of course, he thought she
was the living embodiment of beauty, no matter what. The way she blinked up at him in the
mornings, all bare face and bleary eyes, was enough to make his heart stop. But there was something
about her now, with her hair straight, her eyes darkened by shadows, that made her seem different.
Different in an exotic, exciting way.

They spent the rest of dinner drinking and talking, both of them giddy with the newness between
them. The shocking pulse of possibility and anticipation. Reaching across the table to feed each other
bites from a shared dish. She protested only a little when the waiter arrived with a chocolate souffle,
adorned with a single lit candle.

They were back in the lobby, when Claire froze at his side, turning towards him in an effort to hide
her face.
“Oh my god,” she hissed.

“What?” he asked, alarmed and scanning the lobby for a threat.

She nodded her head towards the maitre d’s podium. “It’s Frank.”

He stared down at her blankly. “Who?”

“Frank,” she huffed, exasperated and impatient. “My Uncle’s friend. He was that guy there with me, the night of the break-in.”

“Ah, I see,” sure enough, when he looked back across the lobby he saw a face he vaguely recognized. A man in a tweed suit, babbling along next to a painfully bored looking blonde women.

“I just got him to stop calling, Jamie!” she said, sounding like some mixture of annoyed caught on an embarrassed giggle. “If he sees me, we’ll never get home.”

He snorted. “I guess we’ll have to sneak ye out somehow…”

“How?”

She risked a glance in Frank’s direction before turning quickly back into Jamie’s chest.

“Oh, god Jamie, he’s coming this way!”

Not knowing what else to do, he unbuttoned his suit jacket, reached out and crushed her against his chest, before wrapping his jacket back around him, covering her head and face.

“Thank ye for a lovely evenin’,” he said primly, walking her backwards past the maitre d’s stand, feeling her shake with laughter against his chest as they staggered awkwardly towards the door.
“Uhm… yes, sir, our pleasure,” the maitre d said, watching them with wide, concerned eyes. “Hope to see you again soon.”

They tumbled out onto the street, cackling like loons. Claire was still wheezing, wiping tears from her eyes as she reached out, rubbing at the new stains that adorned his chest.

“I got makeup all over your shirt!” she said, still giggling helplessly.

“It’s fine, Sassenach,” he assured her, caught up in the way she was looking at him, making him feel ten feet tall.

“So…” he trailed off, breathless. “Where to next?”

The laughter died between them, replaced by something electric tipped and dangerous.

“Home,” she said, eyes suddenly dark and hooded. “Now.”

He knew what she wanted, of course. The same thing he wanted, wanted so badly that he was near shaking with it.

“Are ye sure, Claire?” he asked, feeling desperate and unsure all at once, licking his lips as his eyes zeroed in on hers. “Because we can—”

She kissed him then and everything else fell away.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter fifteen will be up on Monday and I double pinky promise it's going exactly where you think it is 😊
Standing in the elevator with Claire after dinner, Jamie got a sense of something akin to vertigo, realizing it had only been that morning that they’d come together in this elevator, ravishing and desperate for each other. It felt like a hundred years ago. A similar display was made impossible now by the throng of other building residents crowded in with them in the cramped space.

Once at Jamie’s floor, he led her down the hall, too eager and too obvious, dragging her along as she stumbled and giggled in her too-sexy, too-high heels. He was unlocking the door when he sensed it — that faint sense of apprehension, of nervousness, that hadn’t been there before.

He let them into the studio, eyes watching her as she stepped out of her shoes, kicking them to a corner out of the way. She turned to him and he could see her throat working as she swallowed.

“Is something wrong?” he asked her, suddenly alarmed. “Do ye no’ want to — because we dinna have to do anythin’ ton—”

She shook her head, killing the words in his throat. “No, of course I want this.”

She swallowed, wringing her hands nervously. “I just need to tell you something first.”

Tentatively, she took him by the hand and led him to the bed where they sat on the edge of it together. It was the first time they’d been on the bed at the same time since that first night three weeks ago.

A minute and a half later, he was on his feet, rucking his hands through his hair as he paced in front of her, his mind caught up in a forray of emotions and thoughts so contorted he couldn’t even begin
to untangle it all.

_Awe. Wanting. Desperation. Doubt. Denial. Fear._

“Why didn’t ye tell me sooner?” he finally choked out.

She smiled at him through trembling lips and shrugged. “When should I have mentioned it, Jamie? I mean, until last night, we were just friends.”

“I know…” he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Christ, but it’s been a long day.”

“I don’t know why you’re being so weird about this,” she said, crossing her arms defensively. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

He looked at her, shaking his head. “Claire, it’s a huge deal.”

“So, what, you won’t sleep with me while I’m still a virgin?” she asked, rising to her feet, harsh and challenging. “Because I can take care of that pretty easily.”

She said it intending to get to him, he knew, and yet he still couldn’t help his visceral reaction. Growling, low and deep in his chest, he glared at her.

“Stop,” he demanded. “I just need a minute.”

“I’m only 22,” she said after a long silence. “It’s not that weird.”

He wanted to laugh at how wrong she was reading his reaction. How she clearly thought he was put off by this revelation. In truth, he would want her no matter her sexual history. But to know that he would be the first—all right, _good Christ, the only_ — man to know her this way was already making his hands shake, making the breath come short in his lungs.

He huffed, at a loss. “I didn’t say it was weird, Sassenach. I’m just surprised.”
It was almost like his brain was short-circuiting, like he couldn’t properly process what she was saying.

“Why me?” he asked, suddenly, unable to meet her gaze. “I can’t be the first man to want you.”

The overwhelming streak of self-loathing that constantly coursed through him was at a loss, grasping at straws. Like it was trying to find a way to explain why she would want this with him, any reason other than because she thought he was worth it.

He dimly noticed that she was moving towards him and didn’t flinch away when she wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her face against his chest.

“No one’s ever made me feel as safe as you do,” she murmured, so quietly he barely heard her.

“I want it to be you.”

And with those words, something inside him — something deep and vital — clicked into place. Like she had just called him to his life’s purpose.

To his astonishment, he found that the instinct of self-refusal, the one that controlled him in practically every aspect of life, had gone completely silent. In its place was the acute inability for denial. The fact he’d known as truth almost the entire time he’d known her — that he’d never be able to deny her anything.

That voice — likely born of the sole remaining spark of compassion he bore for himself, the one that let him want her from the beginning — was screaming at him, echoing across the walls of his skull.

_She wants this. She wants you. She trusts you, she feels safe with you. You know what to do. You know how to make this good for her. You know how to do this without hurting her. It should be you, because no one’s ever loved her the way you do. It simply isn’t possible._

And then the voice, and everything else in his mind, went silent as she came up on her tiptoes, quick and clumsy, like she was afraid he’d change his mind, smashing her lips against his. They’d kissed a fair amount since that first touch of lips the night before, and yet she’d never kissed him like this.
This kiss was wild and feral. Rendering him boneless, powerless, he was subjected to her desire as she sucked and tugged, whimpered into his mouth, leaving his lips red and swollen when she finally pulled back.

“Christ,” he panted, his forehead resting against hers. “Where’d ye learn to kiss like that?”

“I said I was a virgin,” she pointed out with a wry arch of brow, “not a nun.”

She kissed him again, and again he became powerless, following her like an acolyte as she led him to the bed, working the coat off his shoulders with sure hands.

A few minutes later, he sat back on the edge of the bed with Claire standing between his knees. She was shaking, even as she guided his hands up to the hem of her dress. He hooked his fingers, fisting the hem, white-knuckled with restraint as he slowly, oh so slowly, lifted the dress up and over her head. He took a deep breath, eyes running over her, hungry and dark. She wore matching black lace underwear, her black lace stockings held up by garters.

“Ye’re so small,” he choked out. “I’m afraid I’m going to break you.”

He grunted, reaching up to cup her cheeks, taking a deep, shaky breath as he looked into her eyes.

“Are ye sure?”

“I—”

He stopped her. “Because I’ll take all of it, Claire,” he rasped—a growl, a harsh warning as much as it was desperate plea.

“Everything you want to give me,” one of his hands came down to curve around her hip, drawing her closer. “I just—I need you to be sure.”

He huffed a frustrated, fond laugh. “You’re the only person who could ever keep me from ye.”
She made a small, broken noise, deep in her chest as her hands came up to scramble for the buttons of his shirt.

“I’ve never been so sure of anything in all my life.”

He let her undo the buttons of his shirt, let her run her hands, hot and heavy down his chest, before she was pushing the shirt of his shoulders. Next thing he knew, she was climbing on top of him, straddling his lap and grinding hard against him, even as she pushed him down onto his back.

“We need to slow down,” he gasped into her mouth.

Braced with two hands on his shoulders, she pushed up, looking down at him, eyes wide and unsure.

“Why?”

Something hard and painful as much as it was thrilling and wonderful caught in his throat. The voice in his head scolded him, reminded him that he shouldn’t be leaving her to take charge.

You and your demons can duel it out in the morning. Get it together. She’s the one that gets to be scared right now. Not you.

He took a firm grip of her hips and flipped them, the sound of her surprised yelp filling his ears. He lowered himself down over her, bracing up on a forearm as he brought a hand up to cup her cheek.

“Because if we rush this— if I—,” he swallowed, shaking his head, trying to put his thoughts together. “I need to take my time. If no’ I’ll hurt ye. And I’d rather die wantin’ than hurt ye.”

She made a small, desperate noise as she arched up into him.

“Sshhh…” he hushed, dropping his head and pressing his lips to the corner of her mouth, to her cheek, jaw, and neck.

“Just relax. I’ve got ye.”
She shivered against the cold fabric of his deep navy duvet, watching him as he loomed over her, looking like some carved, hard thing straight out of a Greek antiquities wing. He was standing now, at the end of the bed, and she could hear the hiss of leather and the clink of metal as he removed his belt.

His pants fell with a quiet whisper of fabric pooling on the floor. He stood in nothing but his boxers as he hooked his hands under her knees, drawing out a surprised little breathless sound as he hauled her to the edge of the bed with a jerk. He dropped to his knees, and less than a second later, she felt a pair of hard, calloused hands working at her garters.

A click of a buckle against her left leg, and another against her right. On the left, he rolled the black lace down slowly, pressing soft, searching lips against every inch of her flesh as he reveled in it, amidst the wake of his hands. He repeated the process on the right leg, until the stockings lay in a useless pile beside the bed.

She was panting, loudly, embarrassingly, the heels of her hands pressed into the lids of her closed eyes as her chest heaved, already glistening with sweat. Her hips jerked up involuntarily when she felt the hot press of his fingers curling into the waistband of her knickers.

“Christ,” he rasped, as he pulled the flimsy, lacy fabric down, exposing her, inch by slick, glistening inch.

He was leaning forward, pressing hungry lips to the tensing muscle of her stomach, and she couldn’t stop the desperate, keening noises that ripped from somewhere deep in her gut. He drew the garment down, lower and lower until it was slipping over her ankles, dropping to the floor, insignificant.

Two hot, hard palms pressed down at her inner knees, urging her down, wide and open, before sliding up the warm and quivering length of her thighs. Her eyes were shut tight, and she could hear herself breathing as he looked down at her. Could feel his fingers dancing nonsensical tattoos across the soft flesh of her upper thighs.

His hands tightened on her, adjusting, angling her, until—

Her heels scraped frantically against the hard slope of his back, looking for something, anything, that
would keep her tied down to earth before the unrelenting heat of his mouth ripped her away into the untethered blackness of infinity.

She was mesmerized by the working of his mouth against her, like he was rushed, urgent. He was groaning against her, making her hips snap up off the mattress, rolling into his face.

Her nails scraped at his scalp and her voice ripped out of her in a series of desperate hitching cries. That ache inside of her growing, throbbing, burning—

Her whole body trembled, Jamie’s mouth unravelling her body, inch by burning inch. She felt the crest that first rush like it was a thing unwinding inside of her.

He didn’t stop and at first, she didn’t notice, still too caught up in that mind numbing bliss of sensation. Pretty soon, though, she started squirming under the iron hold of his hands, bruising her hips. Her hair was knotting against the mattress because she couldn’t keep any part of her still. It was too much, and she almost wanted him to stop just so she could take a second and put the pieces of her mind back together.

“Jamie,” she sobbed, one hand flung over her face, the other threaded tightly in his hair. “Jamie, please, I can’t—”

“Ye’re alright, Sassenach.”

She felt the grumble of his words against her, leaving her no choice but to surrender to that terrifying infinity he was tipping her into. She was nothing but sensation, more tremor than woman. Really thinking she would die if he tortured her anymore, she came down from that second rush and shoved a hand at the head in between her legs, barely registering the smug chuckle that came in response.

He crawled up on to the bed, bracing himself over her, tapped a couple fingers at her side, urging her to arch up a bit. She did, allowing him to scoop under, unhook her bra, tossing it to one side before tracing each of her nipples with his tongue. And then he kissed her — or tried to. Claire was still struggling to breathe, panting in huge gulps, and thus unable to reciprocate much.

“Ye come so pretty, Sassenach,” he gasped out, grinning pressing his forehead against hers.

He was lying almost fully on top of her now, and it should have been uncomfortable, because he was so much bigger than her. But really, it felt like being whole. His skin was pressed up against her and she wanted to touch him, wanted to touch all of him. She tried to reach, tried to get an arm up so she could snake it down between them and touch that part of him that was pressed into the soft flesh of her inner thigh. But he wouldn’t let her, he stayed crushed down on top of her, and she had to wriggle harder, more insistent.

“Please…” she begged, digging a hand down between the meshed planes of flesh. “I want to touch you too…”

He groaned, loud and biting, but didn’t fight back when she tried again. Her hand skated downwards, crushed up between the flesh of his chest and her stomach where it pressed up against his.

“Claire…” he panted, sounding wild. “Ye canna…. I need a minute…”

She ignored his words of warning, holding his cock in her hand, letting it rub against her stomach, wrapping an arm around his shoulders to press closer to him. It felt more than a little intimidating, the
length of it, the weight of it against her as she stroked it, rolling her hips forward and desperately trying to find friction. He shoved her down to the mattress, her breath leaving her in a rush, his mouth swallowing her inhale, braced above her, his mouth hard and hungry.

“Yer gonna kill me,” he gritted out, as Claire reached between them again, winding a leg over his waist, arching her hips up. She dragged her mouth away from his to look down and watch.

Jamie groaned — a grating, deep sound, as though he couldn’t help it. She rolled her hips up to meet him; mouth parted, knowing he was watching just like she was. His arms tensed as he held himself up, the slow flex of his abs, the thickness of his hips.

And then he pressed into her, so slowly, so agonizingly slow that it almost didn’t seem real. At first, all she felt was a strange sort of pressure. Dull, and then sharper until—

“Oh!” she cried out, back arching, trying to contain the throbbing pain between her legs.

“I’m sorry,” he huffed, tucking his face into her neck.

There was a tortured, hollow anguish in his voice that had her eyes blinking open in surprise.

“It’s okay,” she said, bringing a hand up to rest at his nape.

He pulled back, bringing himself back over and nodded, teeth in his bottom lip. Breathing heavy, he thrust deeper into her, slowly, torturously. She tried very hard not to wince — not to flinch as he stretched her, tore her, opened her. And yet she saw the way his eyes darkened as the pressure between her legs grew sharper and sharper, knowing that the shock of pain she felt must be reflecting in her eyes.

“It’s okay,” she said again, panting. “I’m okay.”

“I’m not,” he moaned, his open mouth pressed to her forehead. “Promise ye’ll say if ye want me to stop?”

She nodded, eyes tightly shut.

“Oh Claire…” he huffed, sounding desperate.
She nodded again, this time more pointedly. “I promise.”

He wasn’t even halfway in, and she couldn’t decide how to feel about that. On the one hand, she felt so full and stretched that it didn’t seem possible that more of him could fit. On the other, she felt devastatingly empty knowing that she didn’t have all of him inside. And he wouldn’t move — he was so still, even as she ticked her hips up again and again.

“Move,” she begged, sounding desperate. “Please.”

It was a maddening foray of sensation. It did hurt a little bit, but she hardly noticed. The faint, barely there stab of pain was nothing compared to the rush of pleasure that sparked through her at the sound of his groan in her ear and the feeling of his teeth in the curve of her neck. He made a sound, something low and dirty in his chest, and almost fell forward, as though pressing in deeper wasn’t a conscious choice.

She had no real idea it would be this intense. Like he was pressing against every electric-tipped nerve, dragging hard pressure against something inside of her that felt separated from the realm of her own consciousness. It felt like she didn’t have a body anymore, like she just existed as this one single nerve, a nerve that he owned and cherished all at once.

Her thighs trembled where they pressed in against his sides, and she felt like she was about to fly apart into a million pieces. It was too much, not enough. On impulse, her hands came down between them to press at the taut, tensing flesh of her stomach, as though she could feel him moving inside of her. He growled, pressing harder, faster, eyes watching every twitch and tick of her face. He brought a hand down between them, teasing at that place between her legs that made her eyes roll back in her head. Digging his other hand into the thick brown curl of her hair, he lifted her up a little off the mattress until their foreheads pressed together.

He was rolling all the way in now before slipping out, so slowly and yet nowhere near fast enough. She thought she heard him saying things, a collection of words that meant nothing and everything all at once.

*Mine* and *perfect* and *Sassenach* and *Claire* and *perfect* and *mine*.

“Oh f-fuck—” she sobbed, white-knuckled with her hands in his hair.

It was too much and she really thought she couldn’t take it. That thing inside of her, that thing he was
stroking mercilessly, feeling so good it hurt. Like it hurt to even exist.

She sobbed into his open mouth, trembling and clenching around him, wondering if there was something wrong with her, because it wasn’t supposed to feel this good the first time around. She could feel the tears leaking out of her eyes as she blinked up at him, caught up in a feeling that had her laughing and crying all at once. Her hands were slipping across the sweat-slick skin of his shoulders and back as she babbled a torrent of nonsense, arching her back as his thrusts grew more erratic, less controlled.

“Claire,” he gasped. “I canna— I’m gonna—”

The desperate, rough gravel in his voice had her clenching around him. And it did hurt, but not in the way she thought it would. A stretch that ached so good she wasn’t sure if she could ever stand to be free of him again.

His movements sharpened, hardened, once, and then twice, before he was still, trembling over her, hard and rigid. And then, with a rush of breath, he collapsed.

*******

Hours later, he sat in his boxers on the couch, sipping from a glass of red wine. He’d never kept booze in the flat before, finding it too grand of a luxury. And yet, that hard line in the sand seemed to soften with time. As had everything else in his life, since Claire had danced her way into it.

He’d only meant to slip out of bed for a moment, didn’t want her to wake up and find him gone. But he needed to think, and he couldn’t do that with the soft warm pink of her skin pressed against him. Everything in him felt upside down. Contradicting and nonsensical. The way she looked at him, trusting him to care for her, to protect her. Trusting him with her life, making him feel as though he were some sort of invincible giant. The way she touched him, held him, making him feel loved and cherished for the first time since he was a boy.

“Hey.”

His head swiveled up, finding her standing near him, just off to the side of the couch. She wore the dress shirt he’d discarded earlier. Hadn’t bothered to do up the buttons, only wrapped it around her, like a robe. He kept his eyes on her as he brought the cup to his lips, draining the last of the wine. He tossed the cup onto the coffee table before scrubbing a hand hard over his face.
“Hi,” he said, voice hoarse and low. “I didna mean to wake ye.”

She shrugged, taking a step closer to him. He shifted a little where he sat, as if anticipating her next move. Taking this as permission, she eagerly lurched forward and scurried into his lap, straddling him. He palmed her arse with both hands, squeezing harder when he heard that little hitch of breath just before their lips met.

“Are ye alright?” he asked once she pulled back.

She nodded, and he could see her throat working as she swallowed. Her fingers were cold and hard where they pressed into the flesh of his jaw and cheek.

“That was…” she trailed off, shaking her head.

“What?”

She closed her eyes, taking a deep shuddering breath, before opening them again. His bones felt like jelly and he wondered not for the first time if she even knew how devastating she was. How the bold strength mixed with trusting vulnerability, swirling in her gaze when she looked at him, was enough to crack him open.

“It was everything,” she whispered. “Perfect.”

“Aye,” he whispered, though it didn’t really seem enough.

Jamie couldn’t find the words to describe it himself. Everything and perfect barely scratched the surface. The thought struck him in the center of his chest, that it’d been a first time for both of them, in a sense. He was well acquainted with the act itself, having done his fair share of fucking.

But with Claire it wasn’t fucking. Not in that sense, anyway. People didn’t say things like make love anymore, but he was sure that was more appropriate in this case. With her it was almost like he didn’t belong to himself anymore. Like she was ripping him open, laying him bare. There wasn’t room for conscious thought or anything else in his mind, other than her and this and them. Wasn’t any room, because she was pouring into him, filling up all the empty spaces inside of him.
Apparently taking his contemplative silence as something entirely different from what it actually was, she made a small sound deep in her throat, something like a grunt, caught on a whimper.

“Please don’t push me away,” she whispered, pressing her forehead down against his.

And he almost wanted to laugh because the notion was just that ridiculous.

“Couldn’t if I wanted to.”

Chapter End Notes

See you next Sunday!
An Old Friend From Home

Jamie Fraser had always lived his life in a series choices. Picking one path forward over another without looking back. The choice to go to his Uncle after his Father’s death. The choice to leave the company. The choice to join the Police Department.

But then, with Claire, there were no choices. Choosing to resist her would be like choosing to resist the force of gravity. Pointless. Never even considered.

He stayed awake for hours that night, unable to tear his eyes away from her. She slept on her back, one hand resting by her cheek, the other flung high above her head. He reached up, running a light finger down the ridge of her nose, the curve of her lips, the soft round of her cheeks.

He was existing in moments now, individual pieces of reality in which she was here — with him, wanting him. It was terrifying to think of the future in any real way, mostly because he still couldn’t convince himself that she wouldn’t leave one day.

He thought of waking her, of having her again, just because she’d granted him that unspeakable privilege, just because he could.

A word popped into his head then. In gaelic—a language he hadn’t spoken out loud since he was fourteen.

Not just a word, he realized. A name.

Sorcha. Claire. Light.

His hand traveled down, was just coming to rest at the center of her chest when he heard his phone buzz on his nightstand.

A minute later, he was wishing desperately he’d just ignored it.

*****
A few minutes later, he stepped off the elevator, dressed in hastily thrown-on sweats. He gritted his teeth, hating the idea of Claire being alone in his bed — tonight of all nights. He strode through the dark lobby, pushing through the door and out into the street.

A quick glance spared in either direction to ensure no one was watching, he ducked into a secluded alley a little further down the block. The kid was waiting for him, dressed in his usual all black — a leather jacket and too-tight skinny jeans. His long brown curls were tied back in a bun that made Jamie want to roll his eyes.

“Evenin’ Milord,” he said, bringing a lit cigarette to his lips.

“Dinna call me that. And how many times do I have to tell ye to quit it w’ this?” Jamie barked, ripping the cigarette out of Fergus’s fingers. “Ye tryin’ to die at 40?”

“Nice to find you in such a pleasant mood.”

Jamie rolled his eyes. “What’re ye doin’ here?”

He spared a glance towards the general direction of his building and his flat, his attention pulled back to Claire like a magnet.

Fergus shoved two hands in his pockets, bouncing a little from foot to foot, as though to ward off the chill.

“Ned sent me to keep an eye out for you,” he explained, “he thinks there might be trouble.”

Jamie tapped his foot impatiently, his mind much too preoccupied with the warmth of his bed and the woman he left in it to be worried with anyone else.

“Colum hasn’t been seen in Paris in weeks. Ned says he’s in London.”

He froze, blood turning to ice in his veins. “What?”
“Apparently he said he’s considering opening a London office,” Fergus shrugged, “but… I mean, you know how he is.”

For the first time in months, Jamie thought about his Uncle. Not in that vague way of unbidden memories passing through the mind, but in a direct, purposeful way. Colum hated London, and if he was here, he was here for Jamie.

“You know Ned wouldn’t have sent me,” Fergus piped up, “not if it wasn’t legit.”

Jamie tried to recall an image of the wiry old man — one of the only in the godforsaken business he’d ever liked. Remembered the hushed conversations in dark pubs, whispering words of a cause Jamie truly believed impossible.

Without meaning to, he remembered the last time he saw Ned. Right before he left the company. He remembered those final, haunting, parting words.

“He’ll never let ye go, Lad. No’ while he’s free and breathin’.”

“I’m still no’ gettin’ involved, Fergus,” he insisted. “There’s no point.”

“He said you would say that,” Fergus said, digging a hand deeper into his pocket. “He sent you this.”

Jamie took the note from his outstretched hand, unfolding it quickly. It was a short message, written in Ned’s familiar neat cursive.

_He knows about Claire._

And just like that, everything changed.

He’d faced this choice a number of times before. Been urged down a path, first by Ned Gowan and then later by Harold Grey — a path that led to the demise of Colum Mackenzie. It was often
tempting, but never enough to keep him from the other path— the path where Colum won and Jamie lived out his days in self-imposed exile.

There was a time when Jamie was so numb, nothing could have roused any real emotion. Not honor, duty, or family. For so long he was empty, hollow. And then came Claire.

It was small — a dim, low burning fire in the center of his chest, one he’d thought long extinguished. Everyday, she stoked it with her sure, capable hands, unrelenting in her mission to bring him back to life.

And now, four small words had a fury of rage, fear, and conviction burning up inside him, so hot and fierce he didn’t think he’d survive it. His vision blurred, his hands began shaking as his chest heaved with quick shallow breaths. A vision of her popped into his mind, all brown curls and pink cheeks and sweet smiles— darkening suddenly under the shadow of his Uncle. His lips curled up in a snarl at the thought of that vile wretch of a man coming anywhere near her.

He clenched his fist, crinkling up Ned’s note as he tried to focus on breathing. If there was one thing he knew well in life, it was how his Uncle’s mind worked. He was a man who valued power and dominance above all else. A man who proved such power, by taking from others.

Colum would go after her. Soon.

“I want two of Ned’s best men in London at my door by morning,” he demanded through gritted teeth. “Tell him I’ll call in a few days.”

He parted ways with Fergus, wandering back to his building like a zombie. He sat on the front stoop for a long while, thinking of the choice that lay before him. Light clashed with darkness as memories swirled in his mind. Colum’s abuse, wickedness and manipulation locked in battle against Claire’s tenderness and care, warring for rights to his his soul.

He knew it was possible, though he’d never admit it out loud. Colum was only a man after all. He could be beaten. Jamie knew this, of course. He’d just never seen the point in trying. Never seen the worth in such a fight.

If it was just him, maybe it still wouldn’t be worth it. But now there was Claire, and it wasn’t really a choice anymore. He stood up from the stoop in a single fluid motion, turned on his heel and didn’t look back.
A few minutes later, he was hitting the elevator call button, as a sleepy, disgruntled Murtagh grumbled in his ear.

“What?” he rasped in a low hushed voice, “who?”

“Grey. Harold Grey,” Jamie said, “can ye have him in yer office first thing in the morning?”


“I’ve reconsidered his offer. I’ll explain everything tomorrow.”

Back in his flat, he stumbled through the darkness as the lingering adrenaline seeped out of his system. The day had been long — so wrought with many conflicting emotions, he felt drained of everything.

And yet, as he undressed by the bed, eyes glued to Claire where she lay curled up on her side under his duvet, he felt the fire burning inside him. The fire she sparked, the fire that burned for her and no one else. In that moment, he thought of all the terrible things he’d done in his life, and realized with a jolt that, for her, he’d do it all again. Worse, even.

He’d wage war with Colum or anyone else he had to. He’d burn the whole damn city to the ground.

He tried not to think of any of that, though. He’d always been good at that — at pushing his troubles to the recesses of his mind, focusing on the present. It was even easier with Claire. It was as natural as breathing for him to get lost in her, absorbed and wrapped up until there was no one and nothing else in the world.

He hushed her sleepy grumble as his cold body slipped in behind her. He pulled her close, arms wrapped tight as he buried his nose in her curls. He was asleep in moments.

*****
Jamie woke the next morning to a warm weight lying at length on top of him, and to a cold, minty-scented mouth pressing kisses into his jaw.

“Jamie,” she said, voice husky and sleep rough, “Jamie, wake up.”

He grumbled a bit, hands coming up automatically to rest at the curve of her bare hips. She huffed when he didn’t open his eyes, so she brought herself up with her hands on his chest until she was straddling his lap, rocking against him in slow, seductive movements.

He peeled his eyes open at that, immediately caught up in the pools of amber whisky that looked back at him, darkened and needy. Any thought of the night before, or of anything else in the world, vanished from his mind. There was only her.

She smirked at him, rolling her hips a bit more, a shy invitation as much as it was coy provocation.

“You’re usually up before me,” she observed, looking down, teeth in her bottom lip.

“Am I?” he said, all casual, as though he wasn’t dying for more, like his body wasn’t screaming for him to lift her, angle her just right so he could push inside her and—

“Havena noticed,” he lied.

Of course, he knew good and fucking well how she looked in his bed. He had to stop himself from taking a picture every time he saw her, beautiful and perfect, all wrapped up in his sheets.

She whined, wriggling a little more on top of him, begging him silently.

“Did you need something, Sassenach?” he drawled, slow and gravelly, smirking at the effect his teasing was having on her.

“Jamie...” she whined, dropping forward, grinding a little heavier against him.

He tightened his grip on her hips, adjusting her position a little until they were lined up.
The vision of her, all pale naked skin drawn up over him, sleepwarmed and soft, seemed to take up the entire frame of his existence. He couldn’t bear to think of anything else, all caught up in a feeling clawing deep in his chest. A feeling that made him want to like the world a little better — a feeling that made him want to like himself a little better.

“Please,” she begged again.

It was literally all he could do not to move. His hands were at her hips, pressing the promise of bruises into her flesh, clenching with the effort not to do what he so badly wanted to. Not to flip her over and press her down into the mattress. To get himself deep inside her. To have her like he wanted to — fast and rough and hard — as desperate as she made him feel.

“Aren’t you sore?” he croaked out, the bone-deep need to preserve her from any and all harm warring fiercely with an equally primal need to be inside her.

She shrugged, as if his concerns were of no real consequence, “I want to.”

Leaning forward, she ran her tongue up the slope of his neck, biting a little into his jaw.

Her lashes were dark as they fluttered against her cheeks, looking up at him, all desperate and pleading.

“Jamie,” she said again, this time sounding frustrated and impatient.

_Brat_, he thought to himself, though he couldn’t keep the grin from spreading broadly across his face. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the sight of her. He sat up only enough to wrap an arm around her waist, to hold her still as he shifted back a little on the bed, to lean a little more on the pillows, to get a little better of a view.

He guided her up and over him with strong hands on her hips, angling her over him, urging him to rub back and forth, eyes locked on hers, watching intently.

“Like this?” he asked, all low and breathless, getting a fist around his cock, pressing it against her.
Christ, he thought, watching her all pink-cheeked and eager, nodding quick and breathless. She was more than a little heartbreaking, smiling at him with trembling lips, the war between desire and uncertainty playing out in her eyes as she awkwardly tried to work herself into the right position.

And then she was sinking down on him, and for a second he panicked. Scolding himself, he thought he should stop her, lay her down, and use his mouth and fingers to make sure she was ready, but then his eyes focused in on her face, and—

“Oh,” she gasped, looking breathless and overcome with lust.

Slowly, so slowly, it was agony and ecstasy all at once — every aching inch. His stomach tensed hard, his body strained to remain still and let her dictate their movements. He loved watching her — and in that moment, he was pretty sure he could get off to nothing more than seeing her work herself up into that beautiful frenzy.

She sank down lower and lower until he gripped her hips, stopping her, terrified of hurting her.

“Claire—” he gasped out.

A pair of sure, cold hands came up to his own, easing their grip on her, holding his gaze.

“Wanna feel you,” she whispered as she eased down another bit lower.

“Christ,” he groaned, head falling back.

******

At just past nine, he left his flat. Two men were waiting just outside his door, both of them huge, dressed in jeans and dark jackets. Jamie knew without having to ask that they were Ned’s men. After locking the door behind him, he turned to them, whipping out his cell phone.

“This is her,” he told them, displaying a picture of Claire. “She doesn’t have to work today, so she shouldn’t be leaving anytime soon. If she does go anywhere, stay close. Don’t let her out of your sight.”
He spared an anxious glance over his shoulder at the closed door. “Ye canna let her see ye. I dinna want to scare her. Wait in the lobby, near the elevators. She never takes the stairs. If she goes anywhere, follow from a distance.”

With Claire’s safety ensured for the time being, Jamie left his flat, eyes focused on the battle that laid ahead.

*******

In Murtagh’s office, the scene was almost exactly as it had been the day before. Murtagh standing at the wall behind his desk, Harold Grey sitting in the office chair, hands clasped behind his head.

“I must say, I’m surprised,” Grey said. “I’ve been trying to get you onboard with this for close to a year. What’s changed?”

“Does it matter?” Jamie shrugged.

Grey cocked his head to one side. “It might.”

Jamie thumbed at his lip, considering. The scattered ideas he kept hidden in the shadows of his mind still coming out into the daylight, assembling themselves into something like a plan.

“Mackenzie Corp wasna always as it is now, ken?” he began. “When my grandfather Jacob ran it, it was clean. Well—”

He paused, scratching at his jaw before amending. “No’ clean exactly. There was still a good bit o’ bribery and manipulation involved — but with legitimate governments. When Colum took over, he got greedy fast. Steered the business towards war lords and extremists. Thought he could make a name for himself in the black market.”

Jamie was distracted briefly by a buzz from his cell phone. The first of the hourly texts he’d requested from the men watching Claire.

10:15 - Still in flat. No sign of trouble.
He slipped the phone back in his pocket without replying, returning his attention to the men in front of him.

“So,” Jamie went on, “there are a couple of big players in the business who dinna like it. The money’s better, aye, much better. But the risks are so much higher.”

Murtagh nodded slowly as he absorbed this information, “ye’re sayin’ some of ‘em might no’ think it all worth the risk?”

“Aye,” he confirmed, “there’s one bloke in particular. Ned Gowan. Wanted Colum out for a while. He’s one of the first my Grandfather brought on. He’s Vice President now.”

“Can we trust him?” Grey asked.

“Well, he’s no Saint,” Jamie shrugged. “But yes, I trust him w’ my life. He’s a good man. And he’s Colum’s only true rival for power in the business.”

“Ye think he’d help ye?”

He bit back a laugh at that. “I ken he will. He’s been tryin’ to get me on board with his plan to take Colum down for years.”

“So I’ll ask you again,” Grey pressed, “what’s changed?”

*I’ve got something worth fighting for now, he thought. He will not touch her. I won’t let him.*

Instead, he just met Grey’s stare, keeping his face unreadable.

“Everything,” he said at last.

They passed a few minutes in tense silence. When Grey realized Jamie wasn’t going to say anything
else, he sighed in resignation. Bending down, he reached into his briefcase, producing a manilla file folder.

“Very well, then.” He pulled out a short document, signing a line at the bottom.

Murtagh pushed off the wall, bending over to sign a different line on the document, before moving towards Jamie.

“This is yer priority now,” he said, “ye ken what ye’re doin’ here better than either of us ever could, so I’ll leave ye with one final standing order.”

He put a firm hand on Jamie’s shoulder. “Dinna do anything stupid, like get yerself killed.”

He gave the shoulder another pat before moving away again.

“Final order?” Jamie asked.

“For now anyway,” Grey said, holding up the freshly signed document. “As of this morning, you’re officially on loan to MI6.”

*******

Now that the decision was made, Jamie threw himself completely into a cause he’d long thought utterly futile. With careful precision, he resurrected certain parts of his old self, finding strength in the blackest parts of his soul.

After leaving Murtagh’s office on Sunday, he spent all that day and most of Monday combing through Mackenzie Corps’ most recent stock and profit numbers, tactfully identifying areas of weakness. Using a series of random call boxes, he carefully made the arrangements. The meeting, set for Thursday at midday, was easy enough to schedule.

In his past life, Jamie spent years developing certain skills and talents. Among these talents was the ability to move without detection. He learned how to blend into a crowd, knew how to ensure he wasn’t followed. On Thursday morning, he left the flat and headed east. He ducked into a crowded cafe and waited a few minutes before leaving through a different door, heading west. He criss-crossed across streets, turned down alleyways, stopped by a cheap tourist trap near Gloucester
Square and bought an *I Love London* hat and matching sweatshirt, along with a cheap backpack.

At 10:45, he got on the train. Taking the District Line towards London Bridge, he hopped off at the Monument stop at the very last second. He then transferred to the Bank Station, taking the Northern Line to King’s Cross. He paused quickly, grabbing a handful of maps and brochures for overpriced tours from a display on the wall, before boarding another train to Paddington Station across town.

He quickly made his way to the main lobby at Paddington, to a series of benches lined up back to back. He quickly spotted the man he was looking for — wearing a hat and a trench coat, the day’s issue of the London Times covering his face. He was sitting at a bench facing the wall. Jamie took his place in the row facing away from him, so they sat back to back.

Taking out one of the larger city maps he had acquired, he opened it to its full size, pretending to examine it, waiting for the other man to speak.

“James,” the man said, barely audible over the noise of the station.

“Ned,” Jamie said back, keeping his voice low and even.

They passed a few minutes in silence as the crowds continued to move around them.

Jaime flexed his shoulders, keeping one eye on the crowd around them. “Ye recall my conditions?”

“Aye,” Ned said, turning a page of his newspaper. “Ye said ye need men. And ye have them.”

“No’ enough,” he shot back, “I swear I won’t make a single move until Claire’s got more men on her than the Queen.”

Jamie listened with keen ears as Ned shifted slightly in his seat.

“And how is the young lady going to feel about this?”

“She’s no’ gonna ken it,” Jamie said firmly. “They’ll have to keep their distance. Be discreet.”
Ned was silent for a few moments, until—

“I think that can be managed.”

Jamie blew out a huge breath of relief, his main objective having been achieved.

“Now that that’s settled,” Ned went on, “shall we begin?”
A week later….

“So this is the fox den?” Geillis asked, looking around the studio as she followed Claire inside, carrying the second of two heavy-laden laundry baskets.

Claire snorted. “Please don’t call it that.”

She heaved the laundry basket in her arms up onto the kitchen counter, while Geillis just let the other fall on the floor with a loud plop.

“Things must be serious,” she mused, “if he’s asking ye to do his laundry.”

“He didn’t ask,” Claire corrected primly, opening the fridge to collect a water bottle. “He’s been crazy busy lately with this new job. His dirty clothes were piling up, and I had some free time.”

A temporary transfer, to a unit in MI6. Something to do with international money laundering, as he’d vaguely explained. His background in business inspiring his addition to the project. She’d pressed for more, of course, and as always, he’d told her the absolute bare minimum before quickly changing the subject.

“What’s that?” Geillis asked, pointing to something on the floor a few feet away.

Claire narrowed her eyes, moving closer, bending down to pick it up.
“Maison Elise,” she said, reading the logo off the brochure.

Geillis’s eyes widened, snatching the paper out of Claire’s hands.

“Where did this come from?” she asked, peering at the brochure inquisitively.

“No one else ever comes over,” Claire shrugged. “Jamie must have left it.”

She peered down at the logo, something about the name sounding familiar. “I heard him mention this place to someone on the phone. I think it has something to do with the work he’s doing for MI6.”

There was a long, awkward silence.

Claire cleared her throat. “Have you heard of it?”

Geillis pursed her lips. “It’s a club.”

“A club?”

“Aye…” she said, clearing her throat. “There are rumors…”

Claire stiffened. “What kind of rumours?”

“That it’s, like…. a sex club… of some kind,” she admitted with a weak shrug of her shoulders. “Do ye think Jamie would go to a place like that?”

Would he? She thought. Her instinct told her no, of course not. She knew who he was. Could see it every time she looked at him.
She thought of how controlled he was when they were together — how she was wild, begging, and frantic, while he was always measured and collected. How there seemed to always be something holding him back.

Claire realized that Geillis was still watching her expectantly.

“Of course he wouldn’t,” she said, aiming for casual flippancy, “let’s go, before we’re late for work.”

*******

Jamie was surprised at how natural it felt — how easy it was to slip back into his old life. Although, it wasn’t the same as before. Not really. Not at all. This time, he could breathe, could exist, without the knife of shame twisting hard in his gut. In its place was the flame of righteous vengeance, fueled by devotion that bore the shadow of brown curls.

He looked down at the iPhone in his hand, clicking the button on the side so that the screen lit up. Claire’s smiling face stared up at him, beaming over an ice cream cone, a green splotch of mint chip adorning the tip of her nose. A reminder and a talisman.

Ned had kept his word, arranging a security team for Claire. Well-trained men who watched her from afar, eyes vigilant, peeled for any sign of trouble. She was now easily one of the safest women in London. The knowledge of this was the only thing that kept Jamie from jumping out of his skin.

“Ye owe me for this one, Lad,” Murtagh grumbled, looking awkward and uncomfortable in his overly trendy street clothes.

It was a Friday night and the club crawlers of London were out in full swing. Jamie and Murtagh were waiting for the light to change at a crosswalk in Soho, and the older Scot could not have looked more out of place amongst all the young club-goers.

“It was Grey’s idea,” Jamie pointed out.

After securing Jamie’s temporary contract with MI6, Harold Grey had then seen fit to secure a similar arrangement for Murtagh, not trusting Jamie to carry out such a high stakes operation on his own.
He felt bad, of course, that Murtagh had to leave his work at the precinct. But Jamie wouldn’t deny he felt relieved to have the old man by his side.

A buzz from his phone captured his attention. It was a text, from one of the men assigned to guard Claire.


“Something wrong?” Murtagh asked.

“No,” he said, focused on the night’s objective.

Claire was working a late shift, and he wanted to be back at the flat by the time she returned home if it could be managed.

They fell in with the masses as the crosswalk symbol changed.

“Where are we going again?”

“Maison Elise,” Jamie said. “It’s a nightclub. Colum used to have a strong business relationship with the owner, until they had a falling out a little over a year ago.”

They made their way through a sea of cigarette smoke and dancing neon lights, London nightlife out in full swing.

“Maison Elise?” Murtagh asked, scowling, trying to place the name. “Hang on, isn’t that—”

“Aye,” Jamie confirmed grimly.

“Christ!”
The older man had to dodge out of the way, avoiding the path of a stumbling drunk as they made their way deeper into the designated clubbing area of the neighborhood.

“Ye mean to tell me, yer takin me to a brothel?” Murtagh rasped, thoroughly scandalized. “I swear to Christ, Jamie, if Suzette hears about this—”

“It’s no’ a brothel,” he corrected, “at least no’ technically.”

They approached the front of Maison Elise and Jamie went straight to the bouncer at the door. He was huge, towering over both men, wearing a tight black t-shirt and black pants.

“You gotta queue up, mates,” he told them, pointing towards the long line that stretched all the way down the blocks.

“It willna be an issue,” Jamie told him, flashing a cool, confident smile. “Tell Madame Jeanne it’s an old friend from home.”

*****

Twenty minutes later they were sitting across from Madame Jeanne in her private office. She was an incredibly elegant woman, all things considered. The desk she sat behind was clear glass-top, and the blazer she wore was white, with a plunging neckline.

“What exactly are you saying, Mr. Fraser?” she asked, long red fingernails clinking on the desktop.

“I’m saying we have a common enemy,” Jamie answered, leaning a bit forward in his chair. “An enemy we’d both love to see behind bars.”

She narrowed her gaze at him, the black ink that lined her eyes suddenly looking sharper.

“Is that so?” she sneered, red lips curling up in a smirk. “Last time I saw you, you sat at the right hand of the so called ‘common enemy’.”
“I left the business shortly after your row wi’ him. I’ve no’ had any contact with him suince. Ye have my word.”

“And how do I know if I can trust you?” she pressed, her eyes flitting to Murtagh. “Either of you?”

At that, Murtagh stood up, enraged.

“How can ye trust us? How the hell are we supposed to trust you!” he roared, pointing an accusatory finger. “Ye sell girls!”

Madame Jean stood up, matching Murtagh in ire and ferocity.

“I do not sell girls!” she retorted, “I have a staff of women and men. Well paid employees with set hours, and fucking health benefits. I run a business.”

Murtagh was opening his mouth to respond when Jamie intervened.

“That’s enough!” he said, loud and with a sharp air of finality.

He turned to Madame Jeanne—

“Will ye help us or no?”

******

It was almost 1 in the morning by the time Claire boarded the elevator, hitting the button that would take her to Jamie’s floor. She sighed, pulling loose the elastic band that bound her hair, running her fingers through the mass of curls. Truth be told, she’d lingered at the hospital for a long time after her shift, unable to bear the thought of going back to an empty studio.

For the past week, Jamie had been working constantly. Often gone before she woke in the mornings, only returning after she’d fallen asleep. He would leave notes for her, hastily scrawled messages on scraps of paper waiting for her on the kitchen island — her only proof that he’d ever been there at all.
She was just gathering her hair back up atop her head, stretching the band around a newly forming
ponytail, when the elastic snapped, rendered useless.

Grumbling under her breath, she tossed it into her purse, stepping off the elevator and into the hall.

The flat was dark when she walked in, and her heart sank, thinking Jamie wasn’t there. She moved
in further, eyes adjusting, until she saw him sitting on the couch, appearing to be asleep.

He woke as she approached, blinking up at her, looking so beautiful and darkened by shadows, that
it stole the breath from her lungs. He wore dress pants and a button-up shirt, looking exhausted as he
offered her a sleepy smile. Neither of them said anything as she stepped out of her trainers, letting the
purse slide off her shoulder, down her arm, and onto the floor.

Moved by an instinct she couldn’t explain, she slowly began to peel off her clothes. The scrubs first,
and then everything beneath. He watched her, wordless, mouth parting, eyes darkening as they ran
over her body.

Once she was naked she dropped to her knees, leaning back on her haunches before him, watching
for his reaction. After a few moments, she rose up a little higher, running her hands up the hard
expanse of his thighs, looking up at him through her lashes.

“Claire—” he choked, reaching down for her.

She leaned back out of his reach, still holding his gaze, teeth in her bottom lip.

“Please,” she breathed, leaning forward, gently pressing him back down onto the couch, “I want
this.”

Indecision played out on his face, and for a moment she was afraid he wouldn’t let her.

The next moment passed in a blur as he dug a hand hard in her hair and jerked her up until she was
all the way up on her knees, crashing his lips down on hers with a force that had her moaning upon
impact.
And then he released her, letting her fall back on her haunches as he sat back further, still watching her, concern crinkling his lust-clouded eyes.

Claire had to remind herself to take deep breaths as her hands slid slowly back up his thighs. She went for the buttons of his shirt, undoing them quickly, spreading the fabric open, revealing the hard muscles of his chest. Leaning forward, she kissed a trail downwards, marveling in the warmth of his skin against her lips.

Her hands went to the loop of his belt, sliding it loose. His fists were balled up at his sides, all strength and fury reigned in. Controlled. And she didn’t want that. Not anymore. She wanted him to lose his mind a little, just like she did every time he touched her. She wanted just a little crack in that restraint. The barest flicker would do— just a morsel of proof that he wanted her even a fraction of the way she wanted him.

She pulled down the zip of his fly, tugging his pants down until she could work him loose, taking the hard, heavy length of him in her hand. She tried not to think of the one other time she’d attempted this — a sloppy, unpleasant encounter with a boyfriend at Uni. An experience that made her wonder why women would ever participate in such an act willingly.

But now, here with him, she found she was desperate for it. For him.

She did her best not to look awkward and unpracticed as she leaned forward, trying to get into the best position. He was so sophisticated, so mysterious. She thought of Geneva, of Annalise, of the countless women he’d likely been with before. Women who weren’t encumbered by lack of experience, who knew what they were doing.

She tried so hard, gritting her teeth, not wanting to think of that club. Maison Elise. A place where he could get everything he didn’t get from her—

No, she told herself firmly. That’s not him. You know it.

It was nothing at first — a soft press of lips against satiny steel. A sharp intake of breath that had her gaze shooting upward. His head was thrown back, the heels of his hands pressed into his eyelids as air passed through him in quick, shallow breaths.

Encouraged by his initial reaction, she set herself to her task with unabashed enthusiasm. She took
note of his responses, listening intently for the soft grunts or barely perceptible moans caught on sharp breaths.

A few minutes later he leaned up and placed a hand in her hair again, like he had a few minutes ago when he jerked her up for a kiss. She glared at him, holding his gaze as she knocked the hand away, doubling her efforts. He flopped back down on the couch, huffing out an incredulous laugh that ended on a groan.

There was something so erotic about doing this. Up until now, the nature of their sexual encounters were markedly different. While Claire almost always initiated them, Jamie took the lead every time, without fail. And while she normally appreciated his gentle command of her body, it was nice, for a change, to have him this way.

At one point, her hair started falling in her face, proving a distraction. She pawed at the offending locks, trying to get them out of the way without having to pause from what she was doing, when she felt a pair of calloused hands come up to her face, gathering up her thick brown curls, holding them on top of her head.

She smiled up at him — tried to, anyway — feeling an alarming bolt of lust shoot through her at the feeling of his hands in her hair, a little obsessed with the way his fingers were tightening against her. Nails scraping against her scalp, like a little bit of that control was finally— *finally* — slipping away.

“Fuck—” he choked out, eyes dark as he watched her, biting his lip.

The heat between her hips was burning fierce now, something she couldn’t ignore. Without conscious thought, her hand slipped between her legs as she started to rock a little, desperate for some kind of friction.

A growl, loud and gut-wrenching and feral, bounced across the walls of the flat as he leaned forward, jerked her up and off her knees, pulling her until she straddled his lap.

“Definitely no’ a nun,” he half-chuckled, half moaned, hands hard on her thighs as she settled down on him.

******
Her hands were clasped behind his neck, thumbs pressing into his jaw, angling his face up so he had no choice but to meet her gaze. They melted into one another like the ooze of honey, slow and easy and sweet. He gasped out a broken, helpless sound as she sunk all the way down, finally resting on his lap.

She was still at first, so agonizingly still, and Jamie was a little afraid that if she moved at all he was going to come. No one had ever made him feel like this, no woman had ever roused him like this — quickly, terrifyingly, bringing him to the brink of insanity within seconds. He felt like a teenager around her, the way she could get him hard and pulsing with no more than the soft press of her body, leaned against his side as they watched movies on the couch.

When she did finally move, it was slow, testing, a rocking motion as she tried to find a rhythm. It was both bliss and torture, being the subject of her explorations.

And then she was rising up, just a little, before sinking back down again. Over and over again, bringing herself up a little higher each time. His hands pressed hard into the curve of her arse, encouraging, urging.

“Jamie—” she gasped, a shuddering, whimpering breath of a sound, her hands pressing harder into the back of his neck. He felt the dig of her nails in his skin and tried to focus on those tiny pinpricks of pain, distracting himself in an attempt to hold off his finish.

They were both making sounds, echoes of nonsense and desperation singing through the darkness. Her hips started to roll and pitch a bit, even as she continued to rise and sink over him. Her eyes were dark, intent, watching every tick and change in his face, mouth parted as she panted her breaths.

“Christ— Jesus—” he stuttered, as she started to pick up the pace of her movements, the feel of her so warm around him, ripping pinched-out grunts from somewhere in his throat.

She watched him, mesmerized, her soft pink lips slowly spreading out in an elated smile that he couldn’t help but match. She made a sound — something like a gasp filling out into a soft, breathy laugh— something disbelieving and reverent in a way he couldn’t place.

For a minute he thought he couldn’t take it — it was all too much. The way she was holding him, hands on his face, fingers pressing into his jaw, keeping him there. How they were so close, foreheads almost touching, mouths sharing breath. How she was smiling, laughing, looking at him like he hung the stars.
He didn’t have a name for the feeling in his chest — didn’t know what it was. Only knew that it fucking hurt. Hurt in that way that only healing can. He felt the prick of tears in his eyes, the reality of being felt and seen and known and wanted, clawing at him and ripping him open. A rush of feelings burned through him — feelings he had no idea what to do with.

“C-Claire—” he begged, not knowing what he was asking for.

There was a time Jamie thought he could survive anything. He could still remember the day he was told of his Mother's death. Told of the illness she'd suffered through, an illness he was ignorant of. Told of how she'd demanded he be kept away, unable to bear the thought of even looking at him. He was so broken by that point — so numb and lifeless — that it didn't even matter. He could clearly remember thinking if I can survive this, I can survive anything.

But if there was anything he was certain of now, it was that there was one thing he definitely could not survive. He couldn’t survive her. He couldn’t live without having her, now that he knew how it felt to hold her in his arms.

Mental discipline had always been his weapon of survival. He could compartmentalize, keeping his mind clear and separate from the other more primal instincts that influenced the rest of his body. He could bury his troubles, shove away anxieties and worries, and focus on each moment as it was.

But not with her.

She was in his veins. She was in the skin that pricked cold and tight, stretching over his bones. She was his heart beat, that thing in his chest that was nothing more than a machine for so long, not wanting to be or beat or live until she made life something to value.

He felt the press of her lips on his cheek, kissing away the tears that leaked out of his eyes.

“Don’t be afraid,” she whispered, “there’s the two of us now.”

In that moment, Jamie was invincible. They were invincible. Together. They were floating a hundred feet off the ground and nobody, not even Colum, could bring them down.

24 hours later, Jamie would wonder how he could have possible been so naive.
Jamie rolled his shoulders under the stiff fabric of his suit, watching the wall of monitors in front of him. Most streamed footage from the “nightclub” side of the business. A paneled shot of the dance floor, the bar, the dj booth. A sweaty sea of bodies, clashing together, colored by the haze of alcohol and drugs.

The other monitors, however, delivered footage from the cameras watching the other side of the business. A series of lavishly decorated bedrooms, depicted in a grainy, flickery image of black and white.

“That one likes to be whipped,” came a low, sultry voice from behind him.

He snapped his head around, finding Madame Jeanne. She cocked her head at one of the monitors.

“That one—” she explained, pointing to a screen in the top row.

Jamie squinted, making out the image of a man on his knees in the center of one of the bedrooms. He was blindfolded, with his hands tied behind his back.

“BDSM, that kind’ve thing,” she shrugged, hands on her hips, running a neutral eye over the wall of screens. “Not all that uncommon around here.”

He nodded, largely uninterested. Pulling out his phone, he thumbed in his passcode to read a new message.

Fergus: Still at the hospital. No trouble.

“Let’s go back to my office,” she said, pulling his attention back. “I need to let my security back in
He obediently followed her out of the dark room and into the hallway. Back in her office, she ushered him into one of the plush armchairs and walked over to a drink cart in the corner to pour them both glasses of brandy.

“It’s nice having you back around, Jamie,” she said, coming back over to him with two crystal tumblers.

“Can’t say I return the sentiment,” he joked, taking the drink.

She leaned back against the edge of her desk, watching him as she sipped demurely.

“You’re different these days.”

He was barely paying attention. “Am I?”

“More… relaxed, somehow,” she mused, swirling the amber liquid in her glass. “Happier.”

He stared back at her, keeping his face as blank as stone.

“Certainly less brooding,” she smirked.

He didn’t say anything, not trusting himself to speak. He knew he was different. And he knew why. His mind was overflowing with words — words he was dying to say out loud to someone, anyone, just so he could remind himself it was all real.

*Her name is Claire. She’s a nurse with curly brown hair and she’s always forgetting things. She wears socks to bed and always ends up kicking one of them off in her sleep and she cheats at Monopoly but I pretend not to notice.*

*She’s warm and kind and fearless and perfect. And she’s mine.*
He looked up to see Madame Jeanne still watching him, a vaguely familiar look on her face as she downed the last of her glass in a single swing. She set the glass down on the desk with a clink. A buzz from his phone distracted him again, another text message.

*Murtagh: They’re here.*

“We had some good times, didn’t we?” she asked, slinking over to him. “Before… you know…”

She walked around him and a second later, he felt her breath on the back of his neck, arms sliding down his chest.

“We could—”

“Don’t,” he said, low, hard and cold, not even bothering to look up from his phone.

The warm body behind him withdrew, and he heard the sound of a faint, knowing chuckle. She grabbed her empty glass from the desk and refilled it at the drink cart before plopping down into the black leather office chair.

“Who is she?”

Again, Jamie kept his face blank. “Who is who?”

“There’s a woman,” she smirked, leaning back, “I can always tell when there’s a woman.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “She’s none of your business.”

The red-lipped smile widened. “So there is a she?”

He looked away, taking another swing from his own drink, draining the last of it. He stared down at the empty glass as he rolled it in his hands.
“Do ye think he suspects anything?”

“Of course not,” she laughed bitterly.

He looked up, eyed her dubiously.

“I’m a woman, after all,” she said, arching a knowing brow, “and you know your Uncle.”

Before Jamie could say anything in response, his phone buzzed again.

*Murtagh: It’s time.*

**********

Claire looked down with bleary eyes, fumbling with the zip of her fleece jacket as she made for the lobby of the hospital. Exhausted from a long shift, she was barely paying attention to the voice speaking into the phone wedged in between her ear and shoulder.

“Sorry— what was that, Lamb?”

“I said I’m going to be in London for a few days,” he repeated. “I get in tomorrow. I would love to see you if you’ve got the time. I have some exciting news.”

“Sure, sounds great,” she mumbled, still fumbling with the blasted zipper. Still not able to pull it up, she stopped just before the exit doors. “Text me about it, alright? I’ve got to run…”

She clicked off the phone, shoving it into her bag before dropping it on to a table by the door, wrestling with her jacket some more.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,” she muttered before finally, *finally* tugging the thing free, the satisfying sound of a rising zipper feeling her ears.
Work-drained as she was, she only wrapped her arms around herself, trudging out into the cold night, leaving her bag forgotten on the table by the door.

“Claire!” came a voice from behind her as she made her way down the empty sidewalk.

She turned to see a vaguely familiar man in a dark, expensive-looking suit, following after her, her purse in his outstretched hand.

“Oh for heaven’s sake…” she said, moving towards the man, looking up into his face as she took the bag.

With a jolt, she realized she knew him. Colin Mackenzie, the new donor.

“Oh,” she said, stepping back. “Mr. Mackenzie.”

“Call me Colin,” he smiled, tilted his head to one side. “Ye look weary, Sassenach.”

His Scottish accent was suddenly much deeper than it had been before. The name — Sassenach — the name Jamie sometimes called her, sounded strange coming from him. Threatening and familiar all at once.

She shook her head, trying to push away the streak of anxiety.

“Long shift,” she explained with a tight smile. “Have a good night.”

As she turned to leave, he caught her shoulder.

“My car’s just there,” he said, cocking his head towards the street. “Let me give ye a ride home.”

It was an all-black SUV. Another man stood at the door to the backseat, opening it at Colin’s nod.
Anxiety gripped her as she stepped back, moving out from under his hand.

“Really, that won’t be—”

He reached out, grabbing her arm hard and jerking her back towards him.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to insist.”

She tugged back, panic surging in full force as she looked around the empty street, waiting for someone to appear.

“Let me go!”

“What’s wrong? Ye don’t like dangerous men?”

She blinked back at him, struggling against his grip, making a bigger show of it than she really needed to. She discreetly slunk her hand down into her purse, fingers searching.

He bent his head towards her, eyes darkening. “Ye should’ve thought of that before ye started fuckin’ my nephew.”

Her breath caught, and she froze. Somehow, it was almost like another piece of the puzzle was falling into place.

*Jamie’s mentioned an Uncle… hasn’t he? She asked herself. Maybe once or twice?*

Colin smiled evilly. “Has he told ye who he is *bana-phrionssa*? What he’s done?”

At that moment, she didn’t think. She pulled the pink taser out of her purse and held it against his chest. Before he could say another word, she pushed down on the trigger, shoving him away at the same time as his body tensed up. Another second later, he dropped like a stone.
“Hey!” yelled the man at the car as he started moving towards her.

A teenager, 17 or so with long brown hair tied back in a bun, appeared out of thin air and shoved a knife hard into his side, sending him down on his knees with a groan.

The boy was wiping his knife on his jeans as he walked over towards her.

“Claire?”

“Stay back!” she demanded, holding the taser up.

“My name is Fergus,” he told her with a reassuring smile, hands raised defensively. “I’m a friend of Jamie’s. I’ll take you to him, alright?”

He looked behind him towards Colin and his man who were lying on the ground, temporarily incapacitated. “We need to get away from here. Now.”

After a long moment she nodded, lowering the taser. Fergus smiled at her before looking behind her.

“Let’s go. Stay close.”

She turned to see two other men behind her, large and unfamiliar. She started, yelping in alarm.


She looked from him to the men. “But—”

“We’re going to take you to Jamie,” he said again. “No cars, no secluded places. Just a bunch of public streets and a wee trip on the Underground.”
Claire was walking silently beside Fergus, his leather jacket draped over her shoulders as they made their way through Soho. She wasn’t really paying attention, but she did notice that he was talking on the phone in rapid French. She didn’t manage to catch any of it. The other men, Gavin and Leslie, walked a few feet behind them.

Her mouth went dry when she saw where they were going. The club was in full swing, a line of people under a sleek black sign, the name *Maison Elise* streaking across in twinkling lights. Fergus led her over to a side door.

“He’ll be right out.”

Twenty seconds later, the door burst open, Jamie tumbling through. She didn’t have time to blink before she was in his arms. He held her tight against him, babbling nonsense, a series of odd syllables that made no sense to her ears.

Finally he grasped her by the shoulders, holding her away from him, frantic eyes searching her face.

“Are ye alright?” he asked, breathing heavy.

She took in his appearance. He was wearing a suit and his tie was loose, very loose, with the top few buttons at his collar undone. His shirt wasn’t all the way tucked in, the tails sticking up over his belt in places. The jacket looked awkward — shifted somehow, like he’d only just put it on in a hurry.

It all rushed up on her — all at once. What this place was, the state of his clothes, her brain doing the math before her gut could catch up. She looked up from him, to the door he’d just came out of, and back at him, eyes running up his body and lingering on his torso.

He followed her gaze, panic growing alongside realization in his eyes when he looked back at her.

“No— Claire—” he sputtered, hands coming up to cup her cheeks. “It’s not— please don’t think—”
“Milord!” It was Fergus, nodding his head towards a dark SUV. One that looked all too similar to the one Colin tried to shove her into.

“We need to go.”
Sorry guys I know I should stick to a posting schedule but I’m done with school and I don’t know what day it is half the time. Trying to do every six days at this point but honestly who knows.

ALSO!!! To all my commenters!! Thank you soooo much for leaving me such sweet words!! I have had a crazy couple of weeks of traveling and I promise I want you all to know how much I love and appreciate you. I will find time to go back and reply to them all as soon as I can!

Back at the flat, Claire grabbed one of his t-shirts and a pair of yoga pants and locked herself in the bathroom. He took off his suit and had just slipped into a pair of sweatpants, standing in the living room, barefoot and bare-chested, when she re-emerged and headed straight for the kitchen.

He followed her, unsure what to say. For the first time since he’d known her, he couldn’t read her. Couldn’t tell what she was thinking. And that terrified him. She wouldn’t look at him as she rummaged around in the cabinet where they kept booze.

“So I think I met your Uncle,” she said, eerily casual, emerging from the cabinet with a bottle of wine.

“Nice guy,” she deadpanned.

He took a step towards her. “Look, Claire—”

“What were you doing in that place?” she asked.

He considered for a moment, treading cautiously. “Not what ye think.”

She was looking down at the bottle, not at him, as she twisted the cap off.
“That’s the thing, though,” she laughed, dark and frustrated. “I don’t know what to think.”

“Did Colum hurt you?” he asked through gritted teeth.

She did look at him then, brows drawn. “Col— do you mean Colin?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s Colum. He sometimes changes his name a bit if he’s trying to fly under the radar.”

She stared back at him, blinked once, twice, before shaking her head, rubbing her temples.

Taking the bottle and a London PD coffee mug, she went to the kitchen island, boosting up onto one of the stools. She filled the mug to the brim before taking a long drink.

“Well, in any event,” she said at last, “he didn’t hurt me. Up until tonight, he was a perfect gentleman.”

He froze, feeling his heart beating in his chest. “Ye mean, ye’ve seen him before?”

“He made a big donation to the NICU and I gave him a tour,” she explained, “and then I bumped into him at the coffee house.”

“What?” he roared, “and ye didna say anything? Do ye even ken how dangerous he is?”

“Oh, yeah,” she scoffed, taken aback by his ire, “a perfectly pleasant man who drinks coffee and gives money to sick babies. I should’ve called Scotland Yard on the spot.”

“Christ, Claire!” he growled. “This isna a game.”

He was shaking, anger and fear running through him like wildfire, his vision blurring at the edges as he started pacing around the kitchen.
“What did he— did he say anything?”

She shrugged. “Seemed pretty sure we were together.”

And just like that, all the air left his lungs. He stopped pacing, turning towards her slow and wide-eyed. In a dim sort of way, he noted how ridiculous it was that something that small could feel like a gunshot at the center of his chest. How the use of a word in past tense could make it seem like the world itself was ending.

“Were?” he croaked out, knees dangerously close to buckling.

She glared at him. “Why were your clothes all messed up?”

His jaw dropped. “What?”

She met his gaze, unflinching. Panic fueling him, he rounded on her, standing catty-corner at the island, leaning forward on his palms.

“Ye canna be serious,” he said, low and gravelly. “Ye think I’m playin’ ye false?”

She winced. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“You’re just so...so- confusing,” she groaned out, running a hand through her curls. “You make me feel like I’m losing my mind.”

He eyed her. “What… ye think I don’t want ye?”

She rolled her eyes. “I know you want me, I’m not an idiot. But you’re always so controlled and you hold so much back.”
She squirmed a little in her chair, like his closeness made her uncomfortable.

“What do ye need to hear, Claire?” he asked, stepping back a bit, throwing his hands up. “That ye drive me crazy? That all I think about is you and your bratty mouth?”

“You’re not listening!” she yelled back. “I need to hear what you were doing in that place. I need to know why you came out of a fucking sex club, looking like you’d just put your clothes back on. I need you to— to—”

She trailed off, clamping her mouth shut, pausing for a breath. When she looked at him again, her eyes were fierce, flashing like a hawk’s.

“I want to be with you Jamie, but I can’t settle for pieces,” she told him, low and even. “If I’m in your life, I’m in it all the way, or not at all.”

The silence hung heavy between them as he walked over to the island, feeling like a man being shoved off a cliff.

“I had to prove I wasna wearin’ a wire,” he whispered. “That’s why my clothes were like that.”

He looked up at the ceiling, praying for strength. Praying for courage.

“I’m heading up an operation to bring down my Uncle,” he said at last, words slow and measured.

He was quiet for a long moment, giving her time, letting it all sink in.

“Will you tell me more?” she asked, quiet and hoarse.

“Aye,” he breathed, steeling himself as the last wall inside him crumbled in surrender. “I’ll tell ye everything.”

******
She brought the mug to her lips, savoring the sweet rush of spice and heat as she took a huge gulp of the wine. She knew he was watching her as he sat on the other stool, angled towards her, running a hand over his face.

“Colin-Colum-” she shook her head, not really caring either way. “He said something....”

She swallowed hard, trying to bring order to the madness in her mind. “He said that you were dangerous.”

For a long moment, he said nothing. She counted the space of eight heartbeats.

“I am.”

She looked at him then, finding his face so screwed up with shame that it took her breath away.

“Jamie—”

He stood up in a rush, looming over where she sat at the stool, digging his hands hard in her hair. His lips crashed down on hers with a fury that roused her as much as it frightened her. He was mindless, desperate, moaning into her mouth with a devastated edge, like he was saying goodbye.

At long last, he pulled back a bit, still pressed up against her, holding her close.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into her mouth. “I just wanted to— one more time. Before—”

His lips clamped shut as his chin trembled.

“What?” she asked, breathless.

He kissed her again, this time just a soft, tender press of his lips against hers. Once, a deep breath, and then once more, before trailing to her cheeks, her eyelids, memorizing her face in a way that split
her heart in two.

Pulling back further, he looked down at her, pressing his thumb into her bottom lip.

“I need ye to ken…” he gasped, a sudden film of moisture spreading across his eyes. “You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

She made a noise, deep in her throat, reacting on a visceral level to the pain, the utter anguish in his voice.

“You’re scaring me,” she said quietly, voice catching.

He sniffed loudly, leaning in to press his lips to her forehead once more before finally pulling all the way back. He put some distance between them, standing far away from her with his arms crossed defensively.

The tears gathered in her eyes as he told her of his father’s death, and her heart felt like it weighed a thousand pounds in her chest, thinking of him as a boy, alone and scared on the side of the road.

“Ye ken the only reason he was even on that road was because I got into a fight at school?” he said, scowling. “He had to come pick me up. If it weren’t for me, he wouldna have been there.”

She made to get up, to go to him. “Jamie—”

“Please,” he hushed, closing his eyes shut tight. “Just listen.”

And so, she listened, for what felt like years. She screwed her mouth up, struggling not to protest when he blamed himself for the outcome of St. Germain’s murder trial.

“I didna ken much about Colum,” he said, “or the company. Just heard rumours.”

“What kind of rumours?” she asked, fighting the urge to hold him.
He looked at her then, eyes boring into hers, pleading for forgiveness.

“\textquote I was outta my mind, Claire,\textquote” he rasped. “\textquote I was sae angry. For so long, I—\textquote”

He took a deep, shuddering breath.

“It was said that Colum was ruthless,” he went on, “that people knew not to cross him, because he’d kill anyone who did without a second thought.”

Her horror only grew as he recounted the trip to Paris, standing before Colum in his school uniform. Just a boy, heartbroken and rage-worn. Part of her wanted to tell him to stop, unable to bear the thought of him in such anguish. But she listened, tears leaking silently from the corners of her eyes.

And then, it all came out.

“My grandfather, Jacob, he founded the Mackenzie Corporation,” he said. “\textquote A run of the mill defense contractor. Took advantage of the demand during the Cold War — sold guns, weapons systems, tanks. Grandda learned how to make friends with the right people.\textquote”

He smiled wryly. “Mackenzies are good at that. At charm. Grandda charmed his way into the good graces o’ many a government official. Wormed his way past regulations, laws, you name it. It wasna perfect, aye. But it wasna… the way it is now…”

He trailed off, running a hand through his hair. “\textquote When Colum took over, he got greedy. Wanted to sell weapons to anyone that would buy them. Mackenzie Corp had only ever dealt with legitimate governments but he always wanted more. The warlords— the extremists— they were willing to pay and that was good enough for him.\textquote”

Claire, for her part, was surprised to find that she was not shaken. At least not badly.

“What was your role in all of this?”
He bit his lip, clenched his fists, and made a sound deep in his throat.

“I was Colum’s heir,” he whispered. “He made me— I had to—”

“I’m not the same as him,” he said quietly, almost to himself.

He had an eerie look on his face, like he was trying to convince her of something that he himself didn’t believe.

“I’m no’ good. But I’m no’ him either.”

A strangled breath, and then he was steeling himself, looking at her through a mask. “I’ve killed people, Claire.”

She didn’t move, didn’t react. He delivered that particular bit of information as frankly as he would’ve told her that he used to run track at Uni. She blinked at him—

“What?”

“Not— never— Christ—” he groaned, running a hand over his face. “Only people who threatened the business. Men just as bad as me — worse sometimes.”

She stared back at him, trying to process.

“The first time was when I was nineteen,” he said. “Colum was selling guns to pirates in Somalia. He got word of a competitor, a C-list arms trader offering lower prices. He told me to take care of it. And so I—”

“Stop,” she said quickly, feeling nauseous.

The thought of Jamie killing people, of hurting anyone, was almost laughable and it was like her mind just wouldn’t accept it. She couldn’t hear any more about it. She searched her mind, grabbing on to the first possible thing to change the subject.
“What does any of this have to do with *Maison Elise*?” she asked dumbly, trying to put the pieces together.

“Colum had an arrangement with Madame Jeanne, the owner,” he explained. “She would see that his clients.. his important contacts… were entertained…”

He stopped, red-faced, looking at her as he shook his head, panicked and lost. “I’m sorry— I don’t— I’ve never told it all to anyone before… I dinna ken how— where to begin, I…”

She slipped off the stool, going to him without thought. Ran her hands over the rigid arms crossed against him. For the first time, she could see— it wasn’t that he didn’t want to open up to her, it was just that he didn’t know *how*. He was broken, more than she’d ever imagined. And in that moment she knew — knew as certainly as she knew her own name — that she’d do anything, absolutely anything, to put him back together.

“It’s alright,” she hushed, “it’s just me.”

His eyes flashed to hers in surprise.

“Just you?” he asked, snorting, incredulous.

She moved back a bit, frowning. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He grabbed her hand, pulling her back towards him. “D’ye ken what I would give? D’ye ken how badly I wish to be a man who’s worthy of ye?”

A hand traced her cheek, slow and heavy. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and cracked.

“I think I could live a thousand years and still never find the words to say what ye mean to me.”

She gasped, loud and fast, almost bowing into him.
“Jamie—”

“Are ye gonna leave me?” he asked, eyes wide and open, damp with tears as they searched hers.

Her mouth dropped open in shock. “What on Earth would make you think such a thing?”

“Were,” he gritted out. “Ye said— we were together—”

She shook her head, suddenly just as panicked as he was. “Jamie, that was just a poor choice of words. I didn’t mean— I want— I lo—

“Don’t,” he groaned out, head falling forward, dejected.

“Ye should get away from me,” he whispered, “I can’t— I’m no’ good for ye.”

A series of images passed through her head. Of the man who cared for her, who loved her, even though he’d never said it. Loved her so simply, so selflessly that it made her want to cry. A man who held her while she slept, that first night when she was shaken and afraid — who took note of her favorite ice cream, the man who bought her a tiny pink taser for her birthday.

“It hurts me so much,” she said, slowly, carefully, “how cruel you are to yourself.”

He wrenched away from her, growling low and deep in his chest.

“I am not a good man,” he roared, saying it more to himself than to her.

He tore across the flat, needing distance, needing a minute to think. Nothing made sense. She chased after him though, undaunted.

“Yes, you are,” she bellowed back, coming up behind him.
She put her hands on his shoulders, turning him, and he was helpless to resist the urging of her hands. She let her palms run up the hard plane of his bare chest before sliding up to cup his cheeks.

“The best man I've ever known,” she whispered, teary-eyed and fierce.

He tried to pull away again, but she resisted, holding him in place.

“Please look at me,” she pressed, taking his face in her hands.

He resisted a little at first, but he did look at her, lips pressed together in a tight line. She took a deep breath, feeling like she was about to jump off a cliff blindfolded, having no clue what lay in the valley below.

“I want to be with you, I want to help you… work through all of this,” she said, hoping desperately she was saying the right thing. “But I need you to let me in.”

He nodded, sniffing, leaning into her hand where it cupped his cheeks, giving her a small, wry smile. “I used to think I was braver than this.”

“You don’t have to be brave right now,” she whispered. “I'm here.”

Blowing out a huge breath, he fell forward a bit, dropping his forehead against hers.

“It’s hard… to ken where to begin,” he said after a long silence.

She pursed her lips, thumbs stroking over the arches of his cheekbones, trying to think of a way to give him a path forward.

“That reminds me,” she said, eyes blinking open as she was struck with inspiration. “You still owe me.”

He pulled back, looking down at her, brows drawn in confusion.
“22 questions,” she explained with a small smile. “Technically, I still have four left.”
He brought her hands to his lips, kissing them in earnest.

“Fergus called, told me that Colum had found ye, and I—” he choked off, head falling, and she could see the tremble of his muscles as he shook. “I’ve never been so scared in all my life.”

Her earlier ire had long since melted away. He was so open, so raw, and clearly terrified.

She gently extracted her hands from his and held his face between them.

“It’s alright,” she hushed, “Let’s just- let’s just talk. Alright?”

Eventually they ended up in bed, lying on their sides facing one another. Her hands were folded together, pressed beneath her cheek as her eyes searched his face.

*Four more questions,* she reminded herself. “First question— how do you feel?”

He pursed his lips for a moment before his eyes dropped, looking away from her in shame. “Stupid.”

She sat in silence, unsure what to say, unsure what he meant.

“I am a fool,” he whispered. “I shouldha told ye from the start. All of it. I was so weak. Weak and- and so bloody fucking stupid and—”

“Jamie!” she said, alarmed at the way he was speaking. Like he was being possessed by some inner demon.
“I-I couldna help it,” he said, voice breaking a bit, “It felt so good— bein’ around ye. I just…”

He trailed off, and she watched his mind work in his eyes, saw a new anxiety grow in a raging ocean of blue.

“Can I ask ye something?” he asked, voice so small and quiet it broke her heart.

“Of course.”

He swallowed, hard— she could see the muscles in his throat working.

“Are ye….”

He trailed off, breath hitching. His eyes closed for a moment, and when they opened again, she was leveled with an outpouring of emotions. The vulnerability there was shocking, sobering, heartbreaking.

“Are ye scared of me?” he asked, mouth set hard, voice catching at the end.

She made a noise, deep in her chest, shimmying closer to him on the bed as she shook her head fervently.

“No, Jamie,” she said, letting her hand come up, sliding behind his neck, pulling him firmly down for a kiss.

It was long and deep, her lips sliding against his in a slow dance of absorption and devotion.

“Never,” she whispered against his lips.

His mouth quirked up at one side as his hand came up, running along the curve of her waist.
“I still... “ he sighed. “There’s still so much ye don’t ken.”

“So tell me,” she said. “I can take it.”

He didn’t say anything, only looked at her, dubious.

“I’m tougher than I look,” she told him, nudging her leg against his.

The smile that spread across his face then was small, weak, but very much real. “ Anything I’ve got?”

She let out a breathy laugh, recalling how she’d said those exact words to him that day at the gym.

“Anything you’ve got.”

The hand at her waist curved around to the small of her back.

“Do ye mind if— If I—” he tugged her closer, moving until they were pressed up flush against one another.

“It’s easier when I’m touchin’ ye,” he said, snaking one arm down between her and the bed, wrapping her in bear hug, tucking her head under his chin.

“Second question,” she said, voice hoarse. “How did you end up working for the... for the business?”

That starting question seemed to give him a direction of some kind, and he took off, letting it all pour out of him like a torrent.

“ It all started when I went to find Colum,” he began. “He can’t have kids, which is a hard thing to accept for a man obsessed with legacy. He spent years building his empire and he wanted someone to pass it down to. Someone with his blood running in their veins. So when I came along, scrawny and lost and stupid, he finally had what he wanted.”
His fingers crawled up under her shirt, rubbing in small circles at the small of her back as he went on.

“Mam was a mess after Da. Took a leave of absence from work. Stopped going out, wouldn’t see her friends. Started drinkin’ a bit— not too much, mind. It wasna— she wasna in a good place, aye, but she was still a good Mam.”

She nodded into his chest. “Of course.”

With a deep breath he continued. “Colum— he set her up. Made it look like she was an alcoholic. Paid the neighbors to say they saw her hit me, that she was a raging drunk. He went before a judge and asked for custody of me — claiming it was in my best interest. It didna matter what I said. No one would listen.”

She felt his chest began to rise and fall faster and faster and faster.

“They took me away from her,” he whispered. “When she’d just lost Da— when she needed me most.”

Claire wrapped her arms around his middle, holding him tight.

“Jenny was 18, so he couldn’t get to her,” he explained. “Not that it mattered. It was me he wanted.”

She continued to listen as he told her of how Colum took him away from Scotland— from everything he’d ever known. Took him to Paris, the main headquarters of the Mackenzie Corporation. Did his best to turn him into the son he’d always wanted.

“He had me homeschooled by private tutors,” he said. “Political science, economics, business, everything I would need to ken to run the business. When he figured out I had an ear for languages, he hired tutors in Arabic and Russian. He controlled where I went, who I saw, what I did. He controlled my entire world.”

He shifted a bit with her in his arms before continuing.
“He said I needed to be tough. That I was weak. That I wasna a man,” he said, his voice small and quiet. “Told me if I had been a man, I could have saved my father. That I could’ve been there for my Mam, and maybe she wouldna have fallen apart.”

The tears came for the first time then, at first only tiny pinpricks at the corners of her eyes.

“When I asked about her, said I wanted to see her he’d always say—” his voice changed then, mimicking Colum’s deep, dark timbre, “— I said I would make a man of ye, Lad. And men dinna go running home to their mothers.”

“He made me learn how to fight, stuck me in a ring with professional boxers, had them beat the shit outta me until I had no choice but to get big and learn how to fight back.”

She tried to hide it, tried to muffle the sound of distress in the warmth of his chest. If he heard it, he didn’t let on.

“He’d always bring people to watch in the early days, when all I could do was swing my arms around a bit and try to stay conscious as long as I could,” he said. “When it was finally over I’d lie there, ears ringing, hurtin’ somethin’ fierce, listenin’ to ‘em all laugh.”

She cried harder, bit her lip so she wouldn’t beg him to stop. It was like having her own heart torn out at the root. She couldn’t bear it, she didn’t want to hear anymore. And yet she knew she needed to hear it.

“It was a verra violent business. Colum believed in the get rid of yer enemies before they can get rid o’ ye approach. He brought me along whenever he knew someone was gonna end up dead. Made me watch.”

He turned his head a little so that he lay with his cheek resting against her crown.

“I was so lonely. I needed someone— something— anything—”

He blew out a deep breath.

“And then came Annaliese.”
She tensed up automatically, ashamed at the green flare of jealousy she couldn’t suppress. The arms around her tightened as he went on.

“She was the daughter of one of Colum’s department heads. I was 17 she was 20. We spent a lot of time together. She always seemed to be at the office on days Colum made me be there and he was always invitin’ her back to the apartment.”

His voice sounded far away, thoughtful somehow in a way she couldn’t place.

“She was kind to me. Listened to me. I was so eager for someone to— to just be with, ye ken? She let me talk to her of my Mam, of Jenny. I was so starved for company and before long I was infatuated. She was— my— the first girl I—”

He muttered under his breath, fingers pressing harder at the small of her back.

“I ken I should ha’ told ye sooner,” he said. “I never meant to mislead ye about my history w’ her, but—”

“It’s alright,” she said, shaking her head into his chest. “You’re telling me now.”

His shoulders slumped a bit, relaxing at her words.

“After we slept together I thought I was in love—”

He cut himself off, shaking his head fast, blowing out a breath in frustration. “It wasna love, of course. I ken that now.”

His voice changed, softened. “I feel stupid, now, feeling what I do for you. Nothing could ever compare.”

He cleared his throat, before he went on. “Anyway, I wrote her this long, sappy letter spewin’ all kinds o’ nonsense. How I loved her, how beautiful she was. How I wanted to run away w’ her, start
a new life.”

She couldn’t stop herself from searching for fondness in his voice, finding none of it, only indifference with a faint hint of wryness.

“I sent it to her and the next day Colum said he wanted me to come to the office for a meetin’. Had everybody gathered around this big long conference table, made me sit at his right hand. Took out the letter and read it out loud to everyone. They all laughed and it was— I was mortified. At one point, Annaliese came out of nowhere standing behind him.”

“So, Lass,” he’d said. “Jamie here’s made ye a proposition. What do ye say?”

She’d smirked at him, laughing conspiratorially with Colum and the others.

“I think not,” she’d said in a mocking French accent.

Claire thought of that morning all those months ago in the coffee shop. She was shaking, eyes blurring with rage thinking of that blonde bitch in her perfect clothes and her painted nails and her flirty smile. In that moment she would have given anything to travel back in time and claw her eyes out.

“A few months later Colum told me that Mam was dead. That she’d been sick but insisted I not be told. That she’d never forgiven me for abandoning her and she didn’t want to see me.”

A memory filled her mind, one from her birthday during their little game of “22” questions. When she asked about his Mother. She could still see the pain ghosting across his face, the way his mouth had twisted up, the small, broken sound of his voice when he’d said pass.

“He broke me, Claire,” he whispered. “There was nothing left.”

Turning his nose down into her curls he inhaled deeply, as though he were trying to anchor himself to something, terrified of being swept away in a sea of painful memories.

“I became a machine. His machine. I did what I was told, when I was told to do it.”
Her heart started to beat faster, the words *I’ve killed people Claire* playing in her mind over and over again like a sick joke that she couldn’t make sense of.

“He knew I had a natural charm, all Mackenzies do. And I’m no’ ugly which helped sometimes. I learned how to be someone I wasn’t. Learned how to make people trust me. Colum always said information was power and that secrets were a currency. When I wasna killin’ people on his orders, I was huntin’ down secrets.”

She made to pull back, feeling panicked, feeling every single, insignificant bit of her 22 years, and for a brief, shameful split second in time, wondered if she was strong enough for this.

“Jamie—”

His arms clamped down around her like a vice, holding her so tight and so close up against him she felt and heard the bones in her spine popping.

“It wasna me, Claire,” he said, fierce and pleading. “I wasna myself then. I need ye to ken that.”

Her hands were fisted tight at his chest as she listened, as she heard him, heard his soul calling out to hers as clearly as she heard the sound of his voice.

“I ken there’s no excuse for what I did,” he rasped. “But I just—”

She turned her head a little, pressed her lips to the center of his chest, a kiss of benediction and absolution.

“How did you finally get away from him?” she asked, voice cracking from lack of use.

“Ye ken how I told ye of his arrangement with Maison Elise?”

She nodded.
“Colum was always curious about her business— he was always so obsessed with supply and demand. People wanted guns, we sold them. People wanted tanks, we sold them.”

“One day he realized people wanted girls,” he whispered. “And he decided we would sell them too.”

The blood in her veins ran icy cold because her Jamie could never, ever, it just— it simply wasn’t possible. She held her breath, counted to ten in her head, tried to control the tremble that reverberated throughout her body.

“We were at Maison Elise when he dropped the bomb. I didna ken— I had no idea what he was plannin’ and then he said it and I thought I might vomit. It was the first time I’d felt anything… anything real in quite a while. He offered to pay good money for Jeanne’s best girls. But she—”

His hand rubbed up and down her back as he struggled for words.

“I ken people have their own judgements about things, but Madame Jeanne takes care of the people who work for her. She protects them, pays them well. When Colum made his offer, she went ballistic, severed the business relationship and threw us out. By the time we were in the car, I realized I couldn’t do it. I fought him on it. Hard. But he wouldn’t budge. And so I told him I was done. I was no’ a teenager anymore and legally he had no claim on me. So he let me go.”

Her whole body sagged with relief, and yet she still had a feeling in the pit of her stomach. Something anxious and uneasy that she didn’t know what to do with. A little like she was in over her head. She swallowed the feeling down, focusing on the heart that beat beneath her ears. A gentle, good heart that had been put through the worst abuse imaginable. A heart that belonged to the man she loved. A heart that he was giving to her, a heart she now held, whole in her hands.

“I came to London, found Murtagh. Him and my father grew up together and he helped me get into police training,” he shrugged. “I went by Alex Mackenzie when I was with Colum. I thought I could come here and try being James Fraser again.”

“Why did you start working for MI6?” she asked.

“Because I found out Colum was in London. Because— I realized he knew—”

He cut himself off, wrapping his arms tighter.
“Because I finally let myself believe he could be beaten. That I could beat him.”

“Using Maison Elise?” she pressed.

“Aye,” he said. “It exploits Colum’s greatest weakness.”

“What’s that?”

He pulled back then, tilting her chin up to look at him.

“He underestimates women,” he said with a crooked smile.

She looked up into his face and saw the man she knew. Saw the blue eyes that made her knees weak — eyes she’d seen shadowed with lust, annoyance, anger, frustration— but never cruelty Saw a mouth that’d loved her, pleasured her, spoken words of endless devotion. Saw cheeks that blushed pink whenever she praised him.

That’s when she felt the trembling. His lower lip was wobbling and in that moment she saw the shadows of a 15 year old boy, alone in the world and desperate for someone to love him.

“I’m s-so—” he gritted out, shaking violently, “I’m so, s-sorry, C-Claire—”

She wound herself out of his grasp, getting her arms around him, wishing desperately that she was bigger, that she could cover him with her body and make him feel safe, the way he always did for her.

Rolling onto her back, she pulled him with her, hand clamping hard on the back of his neck.

“No,” she growled. “You will not apologize to me. Or to anyone. Do you understand me?”

He was shaking babbling nonsense, scrambling around like he was trying to get away. She grabbed
his face hard, and forced him to look at her.

“Listen to me,” she said, almost yelling, frantic with the need for him to hear her. “It’s not your fault, Jamie. None of it is. You are good and kind and you didn’t deserve what happened to you.”

He was frozen, staring back at her, braced up over her on his hands, eyes welling with tears.

“You’re not broken, my love,” she said, this time in a much softer voice, thumbs stroking over his cheek bones. “There isn’t anything wrong with you. But you are hurting. You need help and time and I swear to you I will be there every step of the way.”

“But what if ye change yer mind?” he asked, looking scared and helpless. “What if ye—”

“I won’t,” she insisted. “I love you. I know who you are. Nothing else matters.”

He made a low, grunting, whimpering sound, his arms shaking as he held himself over her.

“And if you think for one second that you’re going to go on punishing yourself for things that were never your fault,” she said, a bit of the ferocity creeping back in, “then you’d better be prepared for us to do battle.”

He huffed a surprised, breathy laugh before closing his eyes and shaking his head. He opened them again, looking down at her, and she could see it, could see it like the first fissures cracking into the wall of a dam before it bursts.

“How can ye have me like this?”

Tears were slipping out of her eyes and she swallowed, steeling for the flood.

“I will have you any way I can.”

And, with a great, heaving, ripping sob, he collapsed on top of her, face buried in her chest, body racking with alarming force. He wept for what felt like hours, wept to the point of emptiness and
ragged breath. And through it all she held him, the oddest feeling passing over her. It was almost as though all that strength pouring out of him, all of that rigid resolve, was somehow flowing into her, fortifying her so she could carry them both through the storm.

Sometime later, on the verge of sleep, she heard him mumble something into her neck.

“What?” she mumbled. “What did you say?”

He shifted, pressing his lips to her throat before speaking again, this time, much more clearly.

“I was just sayin’ that I love ye too, Sassenach.”
The night was long but somehow felt like it lasted no time at all. There was something otherworldly about it— something holy. For Claire, holding Jamie while he cried— while he sobbed out every fragmented piece of his tattered heart— made her feel unspeakable things. She felt the whispers of it, deep in her chest as his body racked against her. Whispers of devotion that knew no limits, bore no conditions. Of a love so deep she was drowning in it.

She woke in the early hours of dawn, the outside light gray and dim as it leaked in through the windows. Eyes opening slowly, blinking into the adjustment of consciousness, she found Jamie on his side, propped up on an elbow, watching her.

“Hi,” she said, voice hoarse from sleep.

He smiled, slow and sweet, before leaning in to press his lips to hers in a tender, chaste kiss.

“Hi,” he whispered against her mouth, before pulling back.

For a long time, they just looked at one another.

“Ask me things,” he said, after a long silence. “Please.”

She searched his eyes, not understanding.

“I want ye to ken… everything. All of me. Who I was, before. I just…” he trailed off, swallowing, eyes dropping, “I dinna ken how.”
Her heart tripped in her chest as she sat up, moving so that she sat between his legs, leaning back against his chest. He wrapped his arms tight around her, bringing his chin down to rest in the curve of her neck.

And so, they continued their game of questions. This time, with no limits. She gently prodded him again and again as the daylight grew brighter around them. Her questions were random and varying in topic, but he didn’t seem to mind.

What was it like growing up in Scotland?

Braw. It rained a lot and it was fierce cold in the winter. But there’s no place in the world like it. There was always another mountain to climb, another loch to swim in. Another old castle to explore.

Did you and Jenny get along?

For the most part. She was a fierce wee besom who liked to boss me around. But no one’s ever made me laugh quite like she did. We dreamed up all these crazy games. In the summertime, when it stayed light real late, we’d play outside for hours.

Did you ever fight?

Oh aye, of course. Neither of us liked to share. We only had one TV, ken, one VCR. More than anything else we’d fight about what movie we were gonna watch.

What kind of movies did you like?

All kinds. Jenny liked Disney a lot. And Harry Potter was a favorite of hers.

You didn’t like Harry Potter?

Oh I liked it fine, I guess. But it wasn’t my thing. I liked Indiana Jones and James Bond. That kind’ve thing. And superheros were my favorites. When I was five I had this Batman costume that I wore all the time. Mam had a terrible time gettin’ me out of it when it was time to go somewhere.
“What did you want to be when you grew up?” she asked, an hour or so into the game.

“When I was a lad I wanted to be a spy,” he told her with a rueful chuckle. “And then as a teenager, I got really into spy novels. Thought it might be cool to write some one day.”

She smiled at that, a warm feeling in her chest as she filed away yet another fact into her growing collection of details. She’d known who he was before. But now it was like a blurry image was suddenly coming into focus. The picture hadn’t changed, it was still the man she knew and loved—only sharper, clearer, more defined.

Clearing her throat, she inched her way into new territory.

“What were your parents like?”

He tensed, just a bit, but didn’t hesitate much before he spoke.

“Da always seemed like a giant to me. I remember thinkin’ that nothing bad could ever happen if he was around. He could fix anything. He worked for the city, helped build roads and bridges. He had this great big, contagious laugh. I can still hear it in my head sometimes, if I think real hard about it.”

“And your Mother?”

She felt the curve of a smile against her neck.

“She was somethin’ else. She was a teacher, taught preschool down at the kirk. She always loved bein’ around bairns. And she was a bonny artist, always sketchin’ things on napkins and wee scraps of paper. She was…”

He trailed off, and she could feel his throat working as he swallowed.

“…. she was the best Mam,” he said, voice breaking a bit. “She was just so much fun, ken? Always coming up with wee games for us to play. Sometimes in the summers Jenny and I would come
downstairs to find a treasure map waiting on the breakfast table, Mam nowhere in sight. We’d run all around the farm, huntin’ down wee clues. And then, usually around lunchtime, we’d find her waiting for us. Hidden in the trees or an old barn or a wee cave. She’d have prizes for us and lunch waitin’ in a picnic basket.”

She covered his arms with hers where they wrapped around her waist, thumb stroking soothingly. “She sounds wonderful.”

“She was.”

“Who do you favor more?” she asked, suddenly curious. “Your mother or your father?”

He thought about it for a long time, before finally nudging her forward a bit as he slid out from behind her and off of the bed. He went over to the closet, opened the safe he kept there. A few minutes later he came back with a box, about the size of a textbook. It was wooden, an ornate design of celtic patterns carved in to the face and on the sides.

She scooted over, allowing him to sit on the bed beside her, both of them leaning back against the headboard. He placed the box carefully in her lap.

“This was one of the few things I brought along when Colum took me,” he explained. “I’ve no’ opened it since.”

Carefully, Claire lifted the lid. Inside she found a random smattering of objects, most likely of sentimental value, resting in the red velvet lining. A few movie ticket stubs, a kilt pin, an elaborately designed pocket knife, a pendant on a silver chain, a couple of hand drawn sketches, and—

“That’s them,” he said, pointing to a single worn photograph.

It was a bride and groom on their wedding day, looking happy and very much in love. She flipped it over, finding a few brief words written in neat cursive.

_Brian and Ellen - January 1st, 1985_
Flipping it back over, she peered down at the beaming faces, immediately picking out familiar traits and details.

“You have his face,” she said with finality. “The same cheekbones, the same nose. But the hair and the eyes is your Mother for sure.”

He grunted in acknowledgement, picking up the silver necklace that still lay in the box.

“This was his,” he explained, holding it up with the chain wrapped around his finger.

The pendant was small, no bigger than one of her fingernails, some kind of figure sketched on the face.

“It’s a Saint Anthony medal,” he said. “The patron saint of lost things.”

His eyes flicked up to hers, anxious. “I want ye to have it.”

“What?” she started, stunned. “Jamie, no, I couldn’t—”

“But don’t ye see, Sassenach?” he pressed, turning to her, cupping a cheek with his hand. “I was a lost thing. Until ye found me. Ye were meant to have it.”

His face was so open just then, so earnest and loving, that all she could do was nod, lips quivering.

“Will ye wear it?” he asked, even as she took it from his trembling hands, draping it around her neck. He smiled tenderly, helped her untuck her hair from the silver chain.

“Of course,” she said, leaning in to kiss him. “On one condition.”

“Oh, aye?” he asked, leaning back against the headboard with a hand behind his head.
She cuddled up close against him, twirled the auburn chest hair between her fingers, listening to his heart beat.

“Everyday, you have to tell me at least one thing that you like about yourself,” she whispered. “Starting now.”

It was a long time before he spoke.

“I like the way I love you.”

Stunned, she pulled back, looking up at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I wanted you from the first minute I saw you,” he said, a wistful smile curling at his lips. “But then… there was this one day… when we were watchin’ TV at yer flat?”

He shook his head, chuckling. “I was irritatin’ ye, and ye said somethin’ bratty— like ye’re given to do.”

“I am not—”

“And in that moment,” he said, looking at her mouth, tracing the bottom lip lightly with his thumb, “I knew I loved ye, Sassenach.”

Her throat felt tight as she teared up, waiting for him to go on.

“It felt so… good, ye ken?” he said, a far off look in his eyes. “It felt like breathing. Like I’d finally figured out what I was put on this earth to do.”

She let out a grating sob. “Jamie—”
“And I remember thinkin’... “ he said, smiling, full of wonderment, “If I can feel something like this... if I could feel somethin’ so wonderful..... so perfect.... I couldn’t be all that bad.”

She shook her head, tears running in slow columns down her cheeks.

“I love you, James Fraser,” she said, “and if it takes the rest of my life, I will prove to you that you are a man worth loving.”

“I ken that,” he said, smiling, digging a hand into her hair as he pulled her close. “I think I kent it from the first. And I think maybe that’s why I was so scared.”

His hand fell onto the curve of her knee, palm running heavy and smooth up the length of her thigh.

“And now?” she asked, voice catching when she felt his fingers curling into the waistband of her yoga pants. “Are you scared still?”

“Oh, aye,” he said, with a rueful grin. “But it doesna matter so much. I ken now that as long as ye’re with me, all will be well.”

Minutes turned into hours and they melted together, slowly, happily, sweetly, like ice cream on a hot day. He kissed her for what felt like forever, like he was memorizing the shape of her lips as they moved against his. Connected now by so much more than just the heat of wanting, they moved together like a single heartbeat. The heat in her blood was calling out to his, their bodies engaging in a dance of pulsing desire that seemed separate from reality.

He peeled her clothes off slowly, sensually, like he was uncovering some great treasure long hidden from the eyes of man. Each new inch of skin revealed was met with the reverent press of soft lips. He rolled her pants down slowly, unrushed, with a sort of worshipful patience that made her heart stumble in her chest.

Minutes later, she lay before him, completely naked and breathing heavy. Without warning he took her by the hips and flipped her.

“Christ,” he said, kneeling between her legs, tracing random patterns on the backs of her thighs, running a trail up to take a firm grip of her arse. “How could I even think of anyone else, Sassenach? Look at you...”
She was squirming, writhing under the grip of his hands as he pressed a trail of soft kisses, textured by the flick of his tongue, from the base of her neck, through that soft valley between her shoulder blades, journeying down to the small of her back.

With two palms flat on the mattress, she tried to brace up, as though she was desperate to move, to flip over, desperate for something—

He stilled her though, one hand hard on her shoulder, the other on a thigh, spreading her open as his lips ventured over the curve of her ass.

“Fuck, Jamie,” she whimpered, a frustrated, strung-out, bratty, Claire-like sound that made his mind go fuzzy at the edges.

He hummed, lips stretching out in a smile as they traveled once more up her spine, sinking a finger down into the space between her thighs. He swooped her hair over to one side so he could put his lips to her ear as he braced up over her on a forearm.

Slowly, he slipped one long, endless finger inside her. A second one quickly followed.

“Do ye want me?” he asked, working his fingers in and out at a slow, steady pace.

Breathless, she nodded, open mouth smearing against the duvet. The fingers stilled.

“Use yer words, Claire,” he tutted, tongue darting out to trace the shell of her ear.

“Yes,” she whined, hand flying back to grip him by the nape, “Yes, I want you.”

Without another word, he flipped her once more on to her back. Her hands went for the waistband of his sweatpants and he stopped her swiftly, bringing each wrist to his lips for a kiss as he kneeled up over her.

“Let me care for ye, mo chridhe,” he said, “Aye?”
“What does that mean?” she asked in wonderment.

“Mo chridhe,” he said, eyes crinkling with an answering smile, “it means my heart.”

She didn’t have a chance to answer before he was settling himself between her legs, tongue working in a slow dance that had her spine inching up and up and up. Without conscious thought, she threaded a hand hard into his hair, rolling her hips in a desperate search for friction.

It almost wasn’t fair, the things he did to her. The way he made her feel like she was losing her mind. The way he could rip those wild noises out of her, could get her wanton and desperate within moments. The iron grip as he held her thighs, lifting her up a bit as he took her apart, face buried in the shadow of her thighs.

He groaned, loud and broken, like the taste of her killed him, like he couldn’t get enough. His soft lips formed into a pout, the pressure so perfect she was practically sobbing as he devoured her like nothing else mattered.

“I need you,” she cried, after what seemed like an eternity. “Please.”

Panting, he lifted up a bit, tongue swiping over shining lips and chin as he absorbed the neediness in her voice and in her face. Jaw set and eyes fierce, he crawled up the length of her body like a man possessed with his purpose— and his purpose was her.

He was hot and hard over her, a weight that should have been suffocating, a weight that tripped her up a bit for how much she liked it— how much she liked being stuck beneath him, powerless and his. Even more so when she felt that ache, that stretch, that too-much, too-good feeling of his cock pushing into her. There was nothing to focus on, but his body and hers. Every too long, too thick inch of him working inside her.

She braced a hand on his arm, squirming beneath him until she could see into the small space between their bodies. He shifted a little, his arm coming from between them, and hooking under her knee, holding her open and immobile.

Jamie pressed forward, one of Claire’s thighs wrapped around his waist, the other hooked over his shoulder as he took a hand full of her arse, lifting her up off the bed, angling her just so.
She was folded in two as she peered down between them, seeing the heart-tripping thick of his cock resting just inside her.

“Christ, Claire,” he growled, watching her watch them, his breath hot as his hips snapped forward in quick, inching little circles.

More than anything, she wanted to roll up to meet him, to watch him sink deeper and deeper inside of her. She was desperate for that feeling, for that perfect burn of stretching and filling. But he was too big, too strong, and she was helpless under the iron-hard muscle of his body. His shoulder flexed against the curve of her thigh as he looked down at her, brow furrowed and covered in sweat.

He was just there, the barest swivel of hip fading into a total, unrelenting stillness that started ripping at the edges of her sanity. She struggled under him, arching and writhing but he wouldn’t move.

She groaned out a litany, half-mumbled pleas that she didn’t really pay attention to. Something like—

Oh god, and Jamie, and please, and do something—

But he didn’t move. Another heartbeat and still, he didn’t move and he wouldn’t fucking move and—

For just a second she thought if he didn’t move, if he didn’t do something, she was going to cry. And then she realized she was crying. Well, not quite crying. But something close. A small, slow leak from the corners of her eyes. A small, still river of tears. Jamie bent his head then, kissing the trail of it where it met the curve of her cheeks.

“Will— you—please— move—” she panted out, chest heaving sharply as he pressed the tiniest bit further in. Deeper, but nowhere near enough. “Ah— please—”

His eyes were hooded in dark, teeth biting hard into his bottom lip as he inched in more, circling his hips before stilling again, giving her time to realize he still wasn’t all the way in.

“It’s too much sometimes,” he said in a low voice. An admission made, hidden in the shadows of a whisper as he leaned down to press his forehead against hers. “What I feel for ye.”
“I love ye so much sometimes I think might die from it.”

Before she could say anything, he finally, finally rocked that last bit forward, in a sharp, controlled motion, getting deep inside her, buried to the hilt. The next shift of his hips felt like that first giant drop of a roller coaster, like she was emptying out from bottom to top—

And then he was pressing back in, slow, so slow, building inside of her like the water gathering at the wall of a dam before it bursts. His cock was rubbing against every single nerve as it edged in and through her, nudging that spot deep inside of her. It was an aching feeling, bruised and filled up with a kind of toe-curling sensation that made her body tense up, made her pant and tremble as he watched her.

Again and again, harder and harder each time, a steady stroke of love tinged with something rough and powerful and dangerous. His hips were smacking against the back of her thighs, singing out the rhythm of something that belonged only to the silence between them. She cried out each time, voice cracking, breaking as something unspeakable built up inside of her.

Everytime he sunk inside, there was that brief, lighting bolt-quick flash of this is too much before he was stroking back out, only to rock in again, more sure and steady than before.

“I need ye,” he said, voice choking on an avalanche of feeling. “Christ, I need ye so.”

Leaning forward, he braced a hand next to her face, reaching out a thumb to trace at her temple.

“Wait,” Claire sobbed, because it was too much, something burning up between her hips, bright and heavy and electric as it traveled through her. “Jamie, wait—”

“Ye’re alright,” Jamie groaned, kissing her messily, breathless, stroking deep, pace steady and so perfect it was painful. “Just let go. I’ve got ye.”

She was nothing more than a live-wire ending, sparking brighter and brighter and brighter, shaking, clenching, trembling against him— made a sound, something between a scream or a sob, maybe
something a little bit of both.

“Oh, I—” she groaned out through gritted teeth, face turned down, still watching as he moved inside of her. “God — Jamie—”

“Tell me ye believe me,” he begged, ending on a grunt as he rocked back out of her. “About you being the only one.”

She didn’t really hear him, couldn’t make sense of his words, too caught up in the sight of him moving over her. In the tight, clenching muscles of his abs as he rolled his hips forward again, sinking back into her. It was an easy, steady motion reminding her of the way the waters in the ocean would roll and crest and break on the shore. Something powerful and ancient, moved by the force of the Moon.

And then he stopped, causing her to blink up at him, an incoherent whine leaving her lips before she had time to be embarrassed about it.

“Tell me,” he said again. “Please.”

Her mind was slow and sluggish with desire, trying to come up out of the haze, trying to make sense of what he was saying. Her brows knitted together as she looked at him, trying to understand.

With a great rush of breath, he lowered down over her a bit more, bringing a hand up to cup her cheek.

“Loving ye is the best thing about me Claire,” he said, low and hoarse with emotion, “I canna bear the thought of ye doubting what I feel for ye. Even for a second.”

With a sob she arched up, throwing her arms around his shoulders.

“I believe you.”

He shifted a bit, changing the angle of his hips, assaulting every one of her senses with the overwhelming rush of feeling, revelling in each sound he was pulling out of the arch of her body.
She craned a bit, trying to tuck her face into his neck, overwhelmed with it all.

He grunted, braced up over her on a forearm as he took a fistful of her hair and pulled her back, forcing her gaze to his.

“Eyes on me, Claire,” he rasped, his voice like a razor, sharpened by the edge of his need.

She groaned out, long and tapered, pressing the heel of her hand into the meat of his shoulder, fingers arching, nails digging into flesh. They were moving together, every fall one body matched with a rise of the other. The sweaty expanse of his skin slipped against hers and she had to fight the urge to look down between them at the powerful way he moved inside her.

He held her in place, held her immobile and helpless and it felt like they were at the very center of the universe. Still braced up on one forearm he snuck the other hand down between them, rubbing between her thighs with a steady, practiced rhythm.

“Oh, G-God—” she gritted out. “Please— don’t— stop—”

“That’s it—” he growled, kissing her messily, “That’s it, come on—”

And then she was tensing all over, toes curling, spine arching, clenching around him as she screamed and called out for him. She came in a hot rush of that electric tipped feeling, a fire burning between her hips.

 Fuck, she dimly heard him moan as he went wild, pistoning into her with total abandon, a series of high pitched keening grunts ripping out from deep in his gut. At last, he stilled, holding himself up over her with trembling muscles before collapsing just to the side, face buried in her hair.

“Did I ever think to thank ye, Sassenach?” he asked, sometime later.

“For what?” she hummed back sleepily.

It was a long time before he spoke again.
“For lovin’ me.”
“For the last time, I’ll go—” she said, tongue peeking out, tracing her upper lip in concentration as she hopped around the studio on one foot, trying to get a sock on. “You stay here and sleep a bit more. You need the rest.”

It was the next morning and Jamie was still lying in bed, propping himself up on the pillows with a hand behind his head, watching Claire as she moved around the flat. Drained by the labour of emotion, they’d spent the entire day before in bed. Talking, touching and making love. All of it culminating in a dinner of delivery chinese food eaten half-naked and cross legged on top of the duvet. They talked more while they ate, laughing at each other around greasy bites of chicken and chopstick stuffed mouths, the air around them glowing with salt bright smiles.

They showered together before falling into bed, wrapped up in one another, and the outside world felt a million miles away. That morning, however, it had come roaring back to the surface with a vengeance when Claire attempted to make breakfast and found that they were completely out of food.

She dressed as quickly as she could, grabbing whatever clothes she found first—a pair of fleece lined leggings, a long-sleeved t-shirt and an oversized jumper. As she pulled on her leggings, she quickly made a grocery list in her head.

Jamie rose from the bed, poised to protest further. “But—”

“Jamie, please, you hate grocery shopping,” she pointed out. “And besides, I have a million other errands I can run while I’m out.”

In truth, though, she really just needed a few minutes alone, out of the flat. After the past few days she was more than a little emotionally drained. She needed fresh air and time to think. As though he understood this, Jamie didn’t press her further. It wasn’t until she was about to leave the flat that he spoke again.

“Before you go....”

He trailed off and Claire looked up to see him standing by the bed, hands behind his back.
“What?” she asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

With a wide, unrepentant grin on his face, he brought a hand from behind his back, revealing what he held. It was a little plush bunny rabbit with button eyes, heavily tattered by age.

“Ye wanna introduce me to this wee lad?” he laughed, holding the stuffed animal out, shaking it a bit in his hands.

Mortified, Claire lunged for him. “Give me that!”

Jamie was too quick by half, holding the tiny old bunny rabbit high above his head out of her reach. “I thought we weren’t keeping secrets any— oof!”

He fell backwards onto the bed with a great thump as Claire shoved him, tumbling down on top of him. He quickly regained control and wrestled her onto her back, pinning both her hands down easily with one of his, holding the rabbit up again.

“As I was saying,” he went on serenely, even though he panted heavily, as Claire continued to struggle and huff beneath him, “does this wee mannie have a name or no’?”

An eerie sense of deja vu befell her then and she froze, staring up at him as the shadow of the past flew by, slipping through her fingers like sand.

“Claire?”

Blinking, she came back to herself. “What?”

“This wee friend,” Jamie brought the tiny rabbit closer to her face, booping her nose with it. “What d’ye call him?”

She scowled at him, knocking his hand and the offending stuffed animal away. Jamie let her struggle to get away for a few more minutes before holding it up again. “Give up?”
With a heavy sigh, she relaxed beneath him in surrender, her cheeks blushing a furious shade of red, she turned her head and mumbled her answer.

“What was that? I didna quite catch—”

She groaned, and then spoke again in a very quiet, yet somewhat discernable voice. “Puff.”

There was a long beat of silence and then— “Puff?”

“Yes! Puff, okay, like—like a marshmallow or a cloud or something— I don’t bloody know I was five—” she retook up her struggling beneath him, “now will you please get off of me, you giant fool?”

Another beat of silence and then Jamie’s lower lip started to quiver, only to be followed a second later with loud, uproarious laughter.

“What?” She roared at him, indignant. “Marshmallows are puffy!”

That only made him laugh harder. “Will you stop?” she demanded, struggling harder.

“I-I’m sorry—” he wheezed, “but Christ, Sassenach, ye might be the cutest wee thing I’ve ever seen. All flushed and ferocious, carryin’ on about marshmallows—”

With a grunt of frustration and a huge shove she finally managed to roll him off her and onto his back, snatching the rabbit from him as he continued to laugh.

“Where’d you get this anyway?”

“It was in the care package that Uncle Lamb sent,” he said, the torrent of hilarity finally falling away.

The reminder hit her square in the face. “Shit!” She jumped off the bed like a shot.
“What?” Jamie asked, sitting up in concern. “Is something wrong?”

Claire was already looking down at her phone. “He’s in town and I’ve completely forgotten. He called me a few days ago and said he wanted to see me. Christ, how long did he say he’d be here again?” The question was clearly rhetorical and Jamie only watched as she continued to type swiftly on her phone. “I suppose I’ll have to meet him somewhere while I’m out…”

She let the thought trail off and walked over to where he sat on the edge of the bed, giving him a too-quick, distracted kiss on the top of the head before turning to go. He caught her gently by the wrist, pulling her back to stand between his legs.

“You-you will come back though, aye?” he asked, not even attempting to conceal the anxiousness she could see written in the crease of his brow. “ Afterwards?”

It was jarring shift from their rambunctious, playful mood of only a few minutes earlier. And still it only took all of five seconds for awareness to come back to her. A reminder that he had spent the better part of the last 36 hours cutting himself open, letting her see the parts of himself he’d rather just pretend didn’t exist. A reminder of the insecurity and vulnerability that was still coursing through him.

She smiled at him, letting her face soften with a smitten smile as she slid sideways into his lap. With her arms thrown around his neck she ghosted her lips over his, already curving up in a smile.

“Wild horses couldn’t stop me.”

*****

Once Claire was gone, Jamie set about getting ready for the day. Generally, he never liked being away from her. Always liked it better when she was near, when he could see her, know for himself that she was safe and unharmed. Thankfully, she had men following her now for protection and it did a great deal for his peace of mind. It was one of the things they’d discussed the day before. She’d been furious at first at the idea of men following her without her knowledge, and the row that ensued had all but rattled the walls of the flat. Jamie had been immovable on the subject, not willing in any way to take risks with her safety, and in the end she had, begrudgingly, acquiesced.

In truth, he was somewhat relieved to have some space between them now. After everything that had passed between them, after everything he’d shared with her, it felt good to have a moment alone with his thoughts to process it all.
She loves me, he thought to himself, grinning like an idiot in an empty flat. She knows everything, and she doesn’t want to leave. She loves me.

He was giddy. He felt like a new man. And for the first time in a long time, since before his father died, he was thinking about the future. His mind was filled with notions of hope and possibility. It was like he had something to center it all around now. He had Claire, now, and whatever the future looked like for him it would be shaped by her hands. The thought made him feel ridiculously happy. Happy, delighted, strong. And safe.

Will we stay in London forever? He wondered to himself as he stood before the mirror in the bathroom to shave. Angling his face up a bit, he pinched at the flesh of his jaw, drawing his cheek taut before scraping across it with the blade. There was a clink clink clink as he tapped the edge of the razor against the rim of the porcelain sink bowl.

Probably not, he decided after a few minutes of thought. Claire will want a house in the country. Some place with room to breathe. And land for a garden. He smiled to himself, thinking of her, elbow deep in sunrich soil, face and clothes smudged with dirt.

Without warning his mind’s eye conjured a vision— of her smiling up at him, a flash of sunlight reflecting in a diamond on her left ring finger. His mouth went dry, and he barely paid attention to what he was doing as he splashed water onto his face, rinsing off the remaining shaving cream.

Don’t get ahead of yourself, man, he half-laughed, half-groaned to himself. Sure, there was a part of him that wanted to settle down— especially now that he knew such a thing was possible. But Claire was still young. She was still in that phase of her life when she preferred to fill her tomorrows with possibilities rather than solid plans. She talked about traveling a lot and he’d caught her— on more than one occasion— researching med school on her laptop. And so he’d wait. He’d follow her around the world if she wanted to travel. He’d support her through med school if that’s what she wanted instead.

He didn’t care. He loved her. And she loved him back.

He was just doing up the buttons of a plain blue shirt when he went to answer a knock at the door. It was Murtagh and Fergus, both of them shooting wary glances in either direction down the hall before stepping into the flat.

“Jeanne just got word,” Fergus explained, reaching into his jacket pocket to extract a packet of
“Aye?” Jamie said, plucking the packet out of Fergus’s hands and tossing them into the rubbish bin without missing a beat. “Have they settled on a time then?”

“Oui,” the teenager said, rubbing at the shadows under his eyes. “It will happen tonight.”

Jamie froze. “Tonight?”

“Somethin’s no’ right,” Murtagh interjected from where he stood, leaning with his hands braced on the kitchen island. “It’s too fast. Too easy.”

“This is Bonnet we’re working with, no?” Fergus countered. “Not Mackenzie. Bonnet is rash. Wreckless. That is why we targeted him in the first place.”

The older Scot continued to look skeptical. Jamie scratched at the back of his neck, inclined to agree with Fergus.

“My Uncle thinks Bonnet is too stupid to betray him. One of his many underestimations,” he pointed out with a wry smile. “But Stephen grew up in the Irish Mob. He’s a gangster through and through. He’d betray anyone for the right price. And as far as he’s concerned, that’s what we’re offerin’.”

Fergus perked up. “So we’ll go then?”

“No, we’ll go,” Jamie said, gesturing between him and Murtagh. “You’ll stay here and wait for Claire to get home. I’m countin’ on ye to keep her safe.”

He turned to his Godfather, only to find he was no longer at the kitchen island. Instead, he was across the flat, by the bed, holding Claire’s tiny stuffed rabbit in his hands.

“What’d you get this?” he asked, looking pale.

Jamie eyed him cautiously. “It’s Claire’s… from when she was a bairn, I think. Why?”
Murtagh shook his head quickly, as if trying to shake off a bad dream. “Uh- nothing. You ready to go?”

A few minutes later, they stood waiting for the elevator in the hall.

“Claire’s parents... “ Murtagh said after a long silence.

Jamie frowned. “What about them?”

“D’ye ken them?”

“No. They died when she was small,” he said. “She doesna like to talk about it. I don’t think she remembers much from it, but—”

“Ye said her last name was Beauchamp?” Murtagh pressed on. “Did she ever go by a different name?”

Jamie frowned. “No, I don’t think— oh wait!” He started, suddenly remembering. “On second thought she did mention something once. She was raised by her Uncle— her mother’s brother, ken, and eventually she just started going by his surname.”

“So her father’s name wasna Beauchamp then? Do ye remember what it was?”

“Aye, give me a moment,” he bent his head, pinching the bridge of his nose, trying to remember. The brief conversation they’d had about it had been ages ago. “Grant, I think it was.”

He looked up again to see Murtagh looking almost ashen. “Are ye alright, man?”

“Hmm?” the old Scot hummed, his mind clearly a million miles away. “Oh aye. Fine.”

*****
February 2003

The shadows in the dark hallway were dappled with shifting colors—rotating lights of blue and red flickering through the windows from the cars that lined the streets. The last door on the end—flat #413—was open, the gleaming yellow of crime scene tape stretching across the frame.

Henry Grant and his wife, Julia, were both dead. Their bloodstained bodies were sprawled out side by side in the narrow entryway of their apartment. They were still in their formal clothes, having attended a gala downtown earlier that night. He wore a tuxedo, she a royal blue evening gown.

Officer Murtagh Fitzgibbons stepped just over the threshold of the front door, examining the scene with a practiced eye. The words “home invasion” were already floating around the edges of his mind. He was lingering at the door, waiting for his partner. Officer Oliver Billings was short, overweight and smoked at least two packs of cigarettes a day. Murtagh could hear his labored breathing echoing up the stairwell as he slowly made his way to the fourth floor.

At long last, Billings finally came to stand beside him at the door with sweat blotting his brow and dripping from his handlebar moustache. He took in the grizzly scene, and cursed under his breath.

“This is gonna be massive,” he said in his gravelly smoker’s rasp.

Murtagh grunted his agreement. In addition to being well-known, well-liked, and a hot shot barrister to boot, Henry Grant had been a massively popular MP. Come sunrise, London would be consumed by this investigation.

Muffled words were crackling through the radios in staticky, bitten off signals as Murtagh and Oliver moved further down the narrow hallway, keeping close to the wall as they inched around the bodies on the floor. The apartment was big and modern, reeking of upper-class.

“I’ll check the bedrooms,” Murtagh said eventually.

He crept into the master bedroom first. Nothing appeared out of place. There was an antique dressing table against one wall, a tube of lipstick left open, sitting alone on the polished mahogany surface. A suit jacket and tie lay discarded on a chaise. It didn’t appear to him that anyone had been in the room in hours.
A king sized bed sat in the middle of the room and a large photographed portrait hung over the headboard. Henry and Julia Grant standing together—his arm around her waist, her hand on his chest. It took him a moment to register the third person in the photograph. A little girl in Henry’s arms, propped up against his hip.

Frowning, he left the master bedroom and made his way across the hall, trying to remember if the Grants had any children. When he flicked on the lights in the next room, he had his answer. The walls were pink and there was a sign over the tiny bed that read “Princess” in swirling, sparkling letters.

It was with a sinking, twisting feeling in his gut that he realized the room was similar—almost eerily so—to the one his own daughters shared, at his house over in Croydon. Chloe was four and Amelia was two. He could still remember the day he and his wife Suzette painted the walls of that room—in the same shade of pink as the one in which he now stood.

That’s when he heard it. A low, terrified, whimpering sound. Getting down on his hands and knees by the bed, he bent over until his cheek was against the floor and pulled back the bedskirt.

“Hello,” he said, softly. “What’s yer name?”

She was stretched out on her stomach under the bed, little hands fisting into the carpet, staring at him through a pair of brown eyes that seemed almost too big for her face. Moved by some complacent paternal instinct, Murtagh reached out to tuck a stray brown curl behind her ear.

“C-Claire,” she said at last.

“Nice to meet ye, Claire.” He smiled. “Can ye come out from under there so we can talk?”

Even though she was still shaking violently, she nodded, bringing herself up a bit on her hands before crawling out, bringing a small stuffed bunny rabbit with her. Gently, Murtagh eased her over to sit on the bed while he remained crouched down in front of her.

“What’s this wee mannie’s name, then?” He asked, nodding at the stuffed animal.
The barest hint of a smile passed across her face as she held the rabbit out proudly. “Is Puff!”

“A handsome lad, to be sure,” he told her. She relaxed a bit then, though she still held the wee rabbit close against her.

She was so small, delicate, even, dressed in a pink flannel nightgown with her socked feet dangling several inches off the floor. She was one of the only witnesses to what would likely become the most notorious murders of the decade. And with any luck, she wouldn’t remember any of it. He could see a streak of red on her shoulders and it was an easy image to paint. Urgent, shaking hands soaked in blood taking her by those shoulders and turning her away with shouted instruction to— Run, Claire! Go hide! Go!

“Claire,” he repeated back to her with a small smile. “My name is Murtagh. I’m a police officer. Do ye know what that means?”

With a loud sniff, she shrugged.

“It means it’s my job to keep you safe.” Slowly, he leaned in a bit closer. “Will ye come with me, then?”

She stared at him for a long while before finally lifting out her arms in invitation. He picked her up, tucking her into his chest. Her face was pressed against his neck and he held it there, cradling the back of her head with his palm so that she couldn’t look around and see the carnage as they moved through the apartment.

There was quite a stir when he stepped back into the living room with her in his arms. Several people tried to pry her away but she clung to Murtagh, arms around his neck like tiny iron bars.

“I don’t mind taking her wherever she needs to go,” he offered.

His partner shrugged, as if to say, better you than me. “Take her down to the station.”

Halfway through the ride to the precinct she reached up and tugged at his sleeve. Her tiny face was tear stained and pinked with cold from the outside air. And even though her chin still trembled, her brow was furrowed in a kind of determined ferocity that made him want to smile.
“Are you sure you’re not bad?”

*He was so surprised, he had to laugh. “Aye Lass, I’m sure. Why do ye ask?”*

*She looked away from him, her fingers coming up to her throat, almost reflexively, as if she was searching for something that wasn’t there anymore. “You talk like them.”*

*He froze. “Like who?”*
A Castle For MacBeth

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: this chapter was only partially beta’d by @notevenjokingfic since my work schedule is so bizarre right now, I’ve had to write and post just whenever I get the chance.

Also, this is a shorter chapter but I promise it’s chock-full of important info. To be honest, I was gonna wait a week to post this so I could immediately follow it up with the last couple of chapters, but I figured this could be a sign of good faith. I’ll post the next chapter a week from today (Saturday)

Huge shout out to @smashing-teacups for always being down to talk fic with me. You’re the best and I love ya lots!

P.s. – I’m a wee bit out of my mind rn thanks to sleep deprivation and jetlag, plus, I’m a little rusty with this story so, yeah. Love you all so much and thanks for bearing with me!

Claire had never felt more alive than she did on that crisp, cool London morning. Everything in her world seemed right. Jamie Fraser, the man of her dreams, had laid himself bare to her. All these months she’d been trying to solve the puzzle of that man and yet she never came close to grasping the true nature of his complexity. He was so alone, so desolate and so very heartbroken. And yet, he was also hers. Hers to feel and touch and want. Hers to heal. Hers to love.

She wasn’t naive enough to believe that all the sadness was behind them. They still had many hurdles yet to clear. But they were beyond secrets. He loved her so completely, so fiercely, that there was no room for anything else, least of all deception. It pained her to think of how he’d feared her rejection. As if there was anything in this world that could have smote her want for him. Her need for him. She’d lain awake for hours the night before, tracing the shadows of his face. He was so relaxed in sleep, so calm. So open. In his face, she saw everything she’d ever wanted. And she would do anything to make him see that.

That morning, however, she had to focus her attention on the other man in her life. Uncle Lamb. She hadn’t seen him in almost nine months. The uncle who’d sheltered her when home vanished from beneath her feet and given her the world. The uncle who sent her a care package with her favorite stuffed bunny. She hadn’t seen Puff since around the time her parents died. Lamb must have held onto it, she supposed.

They were set to meet that morning at a very special coffee spot on Bleecker Street. Claire felt a smile in her heart, thinking of the uncle she loved waiting for her in a place that meant so much to her.
Once she arrived, her eyes flicked around the coffee house until they caught a perfectly tousled mop of salt and pepper brown in the corner. He looked up as she approached him, honey brown eyes warm and kind through his black, square framed glasses.

“There you are, my love,” he said, standing to greet her.

He wrapped her in a great big bear hug, lifting her up a bit off her feet before setting her back down.

As always, he was impeccably dressed. The crisp white collar of his Oxford button-up folded over neatly at the neck of his navy blue jumper, dark-washed jeans cuffed at the ankles and a silver Rolex watch on his wrist gleaming in the sunlight.

“You look posh as ever,” she teased, as they settled into chairs on either side of the small round table. “A true Hollywood man if I’ve ever seen one.”

In his twenties, Lamb’s career as a historian/archeologist had made a rather unexpected transition into the movie industry. Though he initially just worked as an on set consultant for artifacts, he eventually discovered his passion and natural talent for film. Specifically, in location scouting. He’d even been involved in a few top secret discussions for scouting the next Bond movie—a fact Jamie was likely to kill her for withholding.

“You do flatter me,” he laughed, practically beaming at her. “It’s so good to see you. I feel like it’s been ages.”

“I know. I’ve missed you.”

“And I you,” he said, waving over a server.

“So, what’s new, Peanut?” he asked, after they’d both ordered.

_Peanut._ Lamb’s special pet name just for her. She’d always loved the name in the past, but now it felt wrong. Like it didn’t fit. She thought about everything that’d happened over the past weeks. Things she’d lost, things she’d gained. She wasn’t her Uncle Lamb’s _Peanut_ anymore.
“Not much, really,” she lied with a nervous shrug. “I’ve just been working.”

“Not too hard I hope. Have you made any friends in the city?”

She coughed a bit into her hand. “A few.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, pushing his glasses up a little higher on his nose. “Are you alright?”

“Of course,” she said, willing her face into something she hoped was natural and casual. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You seem different,” he said. “You almost look… older, somehow.”

“Well— Um— You know—” she stammered, laughing nervously, “— nothing ages you quite like working a nurse’s schedule.”

At that he let out a loud, boisterous bark of a laugh, relaxing almost immediately. “Too right, I’m sure!”

“So what brings you to London on such short notice?” she asked, quickly seizing the opportunity to change the subject. “Last we spoke you were scouting locations for the Macbeth movie. I haven’t heard from you much at all lately. Well, unless you count the care package.”

Lambs brow furrows just a bit at that. “What care—”

Before he could finish his thought, the server arrived with their coffees. By the time they’d both gotten through those first tentative sips, he seemed to have forgotten it entirely.

“Anyway, remember how I mentioned good news on the phone? You won’t believe it, but I’ve finally found the perfect place for Macbeth. There’s a man right here in London who’s got the perfect place.”
“Oh?” she said, confused. “You’ve found someone with a fully restored medieval castle? In central London?”

“Well, the castle itself is in Scotland,” Lamb explained. “But the man who owns it just happens to be in London right now. He’s offered to meet me here, actually— I hope you don’t mind, it shouldn’t take more than a few minutes.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “What did you say his name was?”

“I didn’t, actually,” he said, checking his watch. “A chap named Fraser. Brian, I think. Brian Fraser.”

All the blood drained from Claire’s face in the space of a single heartbeat. “What?” She tried very hard to keep her voice from shaking. “What did you say?”

Her Uncle was looking past her, smiling and waving at someone across the room. “Here he is now.”

She turned slowly, eyes fixed immediately on a man walking towards them. Vaguely, she thought of that old expression— you look like you’ve just seen a ghost!

But she wasn’t seeing any ghost. His appearance was significantly altered and if their encounter a few nights prior had not burned the image of his face onto her mind, she might not have recognized him. His hair was no longer the dingy light brown of before, now dyed a shade black as midnight. His clothes were very different. Gone were the expensive three piece suits. Now he wore a pair of jeans and a simple jumper.

“Mr. Fraser!” Lamb stood from the table, dragging over a nearby chair and offering it to their new guest. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

The newcomer shook Lamb’s hand, removing a plaid flat cap from his head as he sat down.

“The pleasure is mine,” he said, turning his attention to Claire. “This is your niece, I presume?”
“Yes, this is Claire Beauchamp,” her Uncle said, smiling at her proudly. “Claire, allow me to introduce Mr. Brian Fraser.”

Not knowing what else to do, Claire reached out and took his hand, feeling a shiver run up her spine at the contact. In truth, she required no introduction. And the man sitting before her was not Brian Fraser.

It was Colum Mackenzie.

****

Jamie had never seen Murtagh like this before. The man was pale, his hands were shaking. They were in a secluded alley next to Jamie’s building. And Jamie was becoming quite alarmed.

“It canna be,” Murtagh said, as though to himself, shaking his head. “It just canna be so.”

Jamie’s heart started to pound hard against his ribcage. He’d seen Captain Murtagh Fitzgibbons look straight down the barrel of a loaded gun without so much as flinching. If something could get him this worked up… this terrified…

“Jesus, man!” Jamie shook him by the shoulders. “Are ye alright?”

The older man grabbed him by the elbows, blinking back into awareness. “Och, Jamie. Lad. I —” He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “I’ve got to tell you something.”

****

February 2003

Three days after the murder of Julia and Henry Grant.

Beaten within an inch of his life, the only thing Murtagh had left was instinct. That, and his police training. Without his intention, his brain took note of every little nuance of the man’s appearance. The brown hair he wore slicked back. Catlike eyes of pale blue, reminding him of aquamarines. His
oldest daughter Chloe was born in March. Her birthstone was aquamarine.

The thought of Chloe, of his younger daughter Amelia, of his wife Suzette, hit him harder than any of the many blows he’d received that night. Blood dripped down his face, filled his mouth with the taste of copper and he could see it. He could see it in his mind’s eye, his daughters growing up without him. Suzette living a long and happy life, without him. Of another, faceless man, sharing his wife’s bed at night. Of the same man teaching his lasses to drive, drying their tears when a lad made them cry. Walking them down the aisle.

'No, please’, he thought. ‘That’s supposed to be me. Those are my lasses.’

How could he trust another man to treat them good enough? To love them as hard as he could? Would another man know that Chloe won’t eat her peas unless they’re hidden in mashed potatoes? Or that Amelia can’t sleep without her soft blue blanket? The one with the little purple stars?

Would he know that Suzette preferred lilies over roses, or that she liked cheese in her scrambled eggs or that she was the softest and sweetest to love in the mornings?

The dark-haired man watched him carefully, taking a long drag from his cigar. “We know Henry Grant had the flash drive. And yet, when we turned the place over we couldna find it anywhere. The only person who left that house alive was the girl. Did she have anything with her when ye took her?”

“No, nothing.” The words scratched up and out of Murtagh’s throat like tiny little knives. “Just this wee stuffed rabbit, that’s—”

“Stuffed rabbit?”

“Aye. A toy. That’s all.”

“Where is it now?”

“In evidence. They took it with the lass’s night gown and socks to test the fibers for DNA.” He breathed deep, wincing at the sharp pain in his side. “I swear to ye, that’s all I know. Please. Just let me go.”
The man considered him for a long moment, and then nodded. “I’ll let you go, Officer Fitzgibbons.” His mouth curled up in an evil smile. “But in return, I’ll be needin’ ye to run a wee errand for me.”
Jamie Fraser’s heart had beat on its own for some time now. Twenty-eight years, five months, three weeks, and nine days, to be exact.

It’s true that the organ in his chest had taken more than its fair share of blows through the years. The first was the death of his father that cut him like a knife and had yet to stop bleeding. And then his mother’s death, and Annalise’s betrayal — the one-two punch that put him on auto-pilot.

For years afterward, he’d lived as a man with no center. Hollow, empty. No dreams, no wishes, no wants. No future.

And then one day, in a coffee house on Bleecker Street, his entire world exploded in an ecstatic symphony of life and love and laughter.

_Claire. Claire. Claire._ Her name wrote the rhythm of his heartbeat.

And now his pulse was throbbing in a rapid, uneven rhythm at the base of his throat. His fear was a living, breathing monster inside of him, frenzizing his thoughts and dulling his senses. The sounds of the busy London street seemed muffled and distant. Murtagh was still talking to him, but he couldn’t manage to make out the words.

With violently shaking hands, he jerked his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed. “Fergus.”
“Milord, I was just about to call you,” the boy said, sounding breathless. “I can’t get in touch with any of the men watching Claire.”

He cursed under his breath, but forced himself to stay calm. “Listen to me mon amie — tell Ned to send in every man he has. Right away.” He paused, swallowing back the thorns in his throat. “We’ve been set up.”

****

Everything at the coffee house seemed to happen at once. One minute, Lamb was excusing himself to the restroom, and in the next, Colum was whispering in Claire’s ear.

“I’ve no quarrel with your Uncle, bana-phrionnsa. Cooperate w’ me now and I’ll no’ harm him.”

His breath smelled like stale cigars and sugary-sweet peppermint.

“Why the hell should I believe anything you say?” she hissed back. Frantically, she scoured the store for the men who were supposed to be watching her.

“Oh, my sweet lass,” Colum chuckled. “I may be many things, but I’m no liar. Throughout the course of our acquaintance, I’ve not lied to ye once.”

Claire frowned, positive that couldn’t be right. “You lied about your name.”

He shrugged. “Colum sounds an awful lot like Collin. Maybe ye misheard me when I introduced myself, and I didna want to embarrass ye with a correction.”

“How considerate of you.”

Colum grinned, revealing slightly yellowed teeth. “Ye’re a wee spitfire, aren’t ye? I can see why my Jamie is so taken wi’ ye.”

Anger roared up in her like an inferno, burning away all of her previous unease. “Don’t you even say his name.”
“Ah, I see. He’s fooled ye then?” Colum’s blue eyes, so eerily similar to Jamie’s, flared with sick amusement. “Made ye think he’s just a *puir misguided soul*? That deep down, he’s really got a heart of gold?” With a cruel snicker, he leaned forward on his elbows, inserting himself well within Claire’s personal space. “Let me clear that up then. Jamie Fraser is a killer and a criminal. He might put up a good front, but on the inside he’s the same as me.”

“That’s not true,” Claire responded without hesitation.

“Don’t believe me? Fine.” He straightened in his chair. “Just ask my brother, Dougal.”

Before she could say anything in response, Lamb returned from the restroom. The happiness radiating from his dear face conflicted sharply with the knot of dread tightening deep in her gut.

“So, Mr. Fraser,” he said, rubbing his hands together excitedly. “Shall you tell me more about this lovely property of yours?”

“I’ll do ye one better,” Colum said with a smile as he rose to his feet. “Why don’t I show ye?”

Lamb’s eyebrows shot up. “Show me?”

“Aye. I’ve got a private jet on standby at Heathrow. We can be there and back before dinnertime.” He turned his gaze to Claire, and the threat in his eyes was clear to nobody but her. “Your delightful niece can join us.”

“What do you say, Claire?” her uncle asked, practically bouncing with eagerness. “A little spontaneity never killed anyone, hmm?”

The statement was so ironic, she barely bit back a laugh as she surveyed the shop around her, trying to discern her options. The men who were supposed to be watching her were nowhere in sight. In fact, she suspected that they were surrounded by several of Colum’s henchman, masquerading as patrons.

And then, of course, there was her Uncle. Lamb, God love him, wasn’t built from the sturdiest stock. While he was kind, gentle, and endlessly loving, he did not fare well with the prospect of danger.
Claire was sure that if she alerted him to the fact that they were currently in the clutches of an international war criminal, he would most likely faint on the spot.

Not seeing how she had any other choice, she nodded. “Sounds great.”

As they were led to a car waiting at the curb, Claire wracked her brain for a way to send a message to Jamie. Thankfully, a blessing came in the form of a phone call just as she settled into the back seat next to Lamb.

Colum watched her in the rearview mirror and she knew he would be closely listening to every word she said.

“Hi, Geillis,” she said into the phone, surprising herself with the steady, even tone of her voice.

“Claire! Where the hell are ye? Are ye alright?” Claire felt a sharp pang at the sound of panic in her good friend’s voice. “Yer wee fox is about to burn London to the ground lookin’ for ye. What’s going on?”

Here it was. The moment of truth.

“Tell him I’m alright. I’m with Lamb,” she answered, forcing her lower lip not to wobble. “Tell him we’ve gone to see an old friend from home.”

****

Castle Leoch was as impressive as it was old and mysterious. Nestled within the rough, green terrain of the Highlands and shrouded in gray mist, it couldn’t have looked more like a Medieval stronghold if it tried. Claire rode next to Lamb in the back of Colum’s black tinted sedan. When they first pulled into the gravel drive, her uncle let out a whoop of delight.

“Splendid! Absolutely perfect. Claire, darling, would you just look at those battlements.”

She gave him a tight smile and nodded, but she found it hard to share in his joy, given the circumstances. Closing her eyes, she sent up a fervent prayer.
They were led inside to a grand entrance hall. Murals and banners covered every inch of the stone walls, and Claire almost managed to get lost in the splendor of it all. *Almost.*

Lamb adjusted his glasses on the ridge of his nose and peered closer at an oil painting. It was a portrait of a man, in traditional Highland garb, with a pair of cat-like blue eyes. “This is in excellent condition. What year is it from?”

Colum didn’t take his eyes off Claire as he answered. “1743, I believe. Just before the Jacobite rebellion. That’s Seamus Mackenzie. One of the last Lairds of Leoch.”

Claire’s uncle nodded in fascination. “Extraordinary.”

A man Claire didn’t recognize appeared from out of the shadows and Colum beckoned him over. “Lambert. This is my associate, Mr. Cameron. He’s here to give you a tour of the castle grounds.”

“Wonderful. How do you do?” Lamb shook the man’s hand enthusiastically before turning to his niece. “Come along Claire—”

Colum stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “The young lady can stay here for tea. I’m sure she’d like that a great deal better than traipsing around in all that cold and mud, wouldn’t ye Claire?”

“That sounds lovely.” She painted on a smile. “Thank you.”

For just a second, something that resembled suspicion passed over Lamb’s face. Just as quickly, though, it vanished. “Suit yourself.” He shrugged before turning to his newly appointed tour guide. “Now, young man, tell me something. Was that a mortimer tower I spotted on the way in?”

Once they were gone, Colum offered his arm. “Shall we?”

When Claire made no show of response, he tutted at her. “Now now, Miss Beauchamp. We did
Jamie paced up and down the length of the plane MI6 had chartered shortly after he’d received Claire’s message from Geillis. A full team would be following close behind, but for now it was just him, Murtagh, and a handful of agents he didn’t know.

His mind was racing, unsure what to make of anything. Bonnet was dead — found in a hotel room early this morning. Clearly, Colum had found out about Stephen’s plans to sell his secrets, or perhaps he’d known all along.

He turned to Murtagh. “What happened after you got Claire’s toy from evidence?”

The older man shook his head. “Nothing. I gave it to him and we parted ways. I never heard from him again.” He leaned forward and scrubbed at his face with both hands. “Do ye ken anythin’ about that usb drive he was after? The one he said was hidden in the wee stuffed rabbit?”

Jamie nodded grimly. “Aye. Everyone calls it Colum’s achilles heel. It’s loaded with evidence against him. If it ever saw the light of day, he’d be done.”

“I take it he destroyed it?”

“No, that’s the thing. He tried. For years. But he never could. It was some kinda special technology. Indestructible.” Jamie pinched the bridge of his nose. “The only way to completely wipe it is to access the drive’s main frame. For that, you need the password. Colum’s spent millions, probably. Hired the best hackers in the world. But he’s never been able to crack it.”

“So, what? He’s just been carrying it around with him all these years?”

“Aye. He never lets it out of his sight.”

Murtagh nodded thoughtfully, and then his eyes widened as understanding dawned. “Claire… he must think she’s the key. Could her parents have somehow told her the password before they died?”
Jamie shrugged, pushing down the nausea that boiled in his stomach. “It’s possible.”

“Jesus.” The older man rubbed at his eyeballs with his fists. “This whole time, we thought that auld crack pot was after you, but…”

“Nah. Colum’s sudden appearance in London has never been about me. It’s always been about Claire.”

****

“For the last time!” Claire shouted. “I don’t know anything about a password. I barely remember my parents at all!”

“Lies!” Colum hissed, his spit misting over her face.

They were in his study now, trapped behind a locked oak door. She sat in a chair while Colum leaned over her, becoming more and more unhinged with each moment of his nonsensical interrogation.

With a growl, he pushed up and walked away from her. “Your father was a real cunt, ye know that? So fucking arrogant.” He went to a cart in the corner and poured a glass of whiskey. “He thought he could take me down. And how did that turn out for him?”

Claire lifted her chin. “He died trying to stop a monster. I’m proud to be his daughter.”

Colum threw his head back and laughed. “You think he came after me in the name of the greater good? Nah, lass. Your da wanted to make a name for himself. Thought he could use me to do it. Tell me something, is vanity a cause worth dying for? I certainly hope so. Especially since your mother died for it too.”

She bared her teeth at him. “At least my parents left a legacy behind. You can steal a hundred boys away from their mothers, but you’ll never have that.”
He went ramrod straight in an instant, turning to look at her with murder in his eyes. Maybe Claire should have been afraid, but instead all she felt was triumph. And an instinct, screaming at her to keep pushing.

“I mean, goddamn Collin,” she said, purposefully using the mispronunciation of his name. “I get that your prick doesn’t work right, but do you have to make that everyone else’s problem? Can’t you just adopt a parakeet or something?”

The next ten seconds seemed to come and go at the speed of light. She heard the shatter as Colum’s crystal glass fell to the floor, heard the floorboards creak beneath his feet as they tore a path towards her. His hand was rearing back and slapping her across the face so fast, she didn’t have time to flinch.

The blow struck her so hard that she and the chair were both knocked to the side, toppling down to the floor. The kick to her ribs came next, followed shortly by another. She wheezed in breaths as she tried to crawl away. Behind her, she heard the cock of a pistol.

She turned to face him, scurrying backwards into the corner. Colum’s eyes were ripe with madness as he pointed the gun, and something in Claire’s gut told her this might be the end. Jamie’s face flashed through her mind and she wanted to weep, but not for herself.

No, her thoughts were only of him.

He doesn’t deserve this, she thought. He doesn’t deserve to hurt anymore. He’s lost so much. I can’t let him lose me too.

“Ye know something? It occurs to me…” Colum said as he inched closer. “You’re the only living person who has any connection to Henry Grant. If anyone knows the password, it’d be you, right? And well, with you gone…. A sneer spread across his face. “My problem pretty much goes away, doesn’t it?”

****

The second they pulled up at Leoch, Jamie knew they were too late. The front door sat wide open and an eerie sense of dread hung in the gloomy mist.
“You lot search the grounds,” he said to Murtagh and a handful of agents, before pointing at the men closest to him. “You two come with me.”

Inside, the house was deathly quiet. It was quite obvious that Colum and his men had fled. But an instinct that ran as deep as survival told him that Claire was still here. They went from room to room, searching meticulously; and as the minutes passed, his throat grew dry with terror.

The color drained from Jamie’s face at the possibility that his uncle took Claire with him when he fled. When he didn’t want to be found, Colum was little more than a ghost.

Slowly, he turned down the corner of a secluded hallway on the third floor. A light was shining through the door that lead to Colum’s study and Jamie’s heart thumped into overdrive as he crept closer. A small sound had him freezing in his tracks.

*Was that….?*

The sound came again, a little louder. An agonized whimper that made Jamie’s vision go blurry at the edges. Having lost all restraint, he barrelled down the hall and through the unlocked door.

Claire lay on her back in the corner in a pool of her own blood, her hands clutched at her middle. Those amber pools he worshipped locked on his, and Jamie’s knees almost buckled in response.

“Get a fucking ambulence!” He roared at the men behind him as he wrenched off his jacket. “NOW!”

He barely heard the stampede of their retreat as he fell at Claire’s side. He pried her shaking hands away from her abdomen and ripped her sweater straight up the middle.

“Ssshhh, ssshh,” he hushed when she made yet another sound of distress. “I’m here. It’s okay. Ye’re okay.”

He pressed his jacket hard against her wound, biting back a sob when she cried out in pain. “I’m so sorry, Claire. I’m so fucking sorry.”
She shook her head weakly, causing the curl of her brown hair to rustle against the stone floor. Her perfect lips were chapped and ashen, her face completely void of color and covered in a cold sweat. The lovely flush of her cheeks that he adored so much was gone without a trace.

“Not your fault…” she said on a wheeze.

He rocked a little on his knees as he pressed against her wound, no longer able to contain the violent agony coursing through his body. “Help is coming. Ye’re going to be just fine okay? Ye’re gonna be fucking perfect. Do ye hear me?” His shoulders shook as a horrible sound wracked out of his chest. “I’m gonna get ye out of here. I’m gonna get ye in a soft, warm bed—” He paused and sniffed loudly. “I’m gonna make everything okay. Aye?”

Her eyes started to flutter closed and he lurched forward. “No, no! Dinna go to sleep.” When they slowly pried open again, he cried out in relief. “Aye! That’s it. Show me those bonny whisky eyes.”

Slowly she reached a hand up to touch his cheek. He weeped out in agony and relief the moment her fingers met his skin, leaning into her touch like a starving man.

“Jamie…” she breathed. “My wonderful man. I knew you’d come.”

“Always,” he swore, turning his head to press a hard kiss to the meat of her palm.

“You’re so good,” she said, her voice growing fainter, her breaths coming quicker. “So, so good. You’re going to have the most beautiful life.”

Fresh alarm coursed through him and he pressed harder on her wound. “Aye, I will. And I’m gonna share it with you.” The tears were rolling down his face in a steady stream, but he made no move to wipe them. “We’re gonna do it right, Sassenach. You and me. Ye’re gonna go to medical school. Ye’re gonna be the best damn doctor this world’s ever seen.”

Her smile was faint, and wistful. “Oh? What…. What about you?”

“Me?” He shrugged. “Who kens. Maybe I’ll stay home. Take care of all the bairns we’re gonna make.”
She winced through a laugh. “Yeah?”

“Aye. Just call me Mister Mom.”

Her eyelids started to droop again. “Sounds nice.”

He could feel her slipping away from him and it made him frantic.

“Goddamnit, Sassenach. Don’t you dare give up. I only just found ye,” he cried through the shrapnel of his breaking heart. “I fought so hard to love ye. Please, Claire. I beg ye. Fight for me.”

“I’ll love you forever, James Fraser,” she rasped. “I’ll never stop.”

He grit his teeth so hard he felt the enamel crack. The tears slipped hot down his face, landing on Claire’s pale skin. Dripping down her nose, her cheeks, slipping over her parted lips as she hauled in short, rapid breaths.

_I love you to death._ That was what his mother used to say. But the words didn’t feel right just then. The cold of her blood smeared against his skin as he tucked his face into the crook of her neck.

“Ye loved me to life, _mo nighean donn_,” he sobbed. “Ye loved me back to life.”
Ghosts

Chapter Notes

Thanks to @notevenjokingfic as well as @lcbeauchampofarth and @happytoobserve! Not much longer to go now!

Claire Beauchamp wasn’t dead. She was fairly certain of that. And yet, she wasn’t quite alive either. It was the oddest sensation — like she was floating high enough to touch the stars. She might have drifted off to live amongst them if it weren’t for the leash on her heart, trying with all its might to pull her back down to Earth.

It troubled her for a moment. The stars were so lovely and bright, after all. And yet, the leash would not let her go. It was a struggle, sifting through the haze of her muddled mind to find any real notion of the life she was so close to leaving behind.

Was it a good life? Did she have family? Friends?

She focused on the other end of the hold on her heart, and something inside her clicked into focus.

There was someone waiting for her there. A man with hair the color of fire and eyes that reminded her of the ocean at night. She tried to speak his name, but it wouldn’t come to her lips. She couldn’t name him.

But God, did she love him.

With that realization, the stars she’d just been pining for disappeared. Panic laced through her. She needed to get back. How long had she been gone? She tried to open her mouth to say something, to scream. To tell the man she loved so much that she was still here, still fighting.

*****

She woke with a jolt, and flexed her hands on instinct.
Hands.

She sat up and looked down, marveling at the lines of her palm. Yes, that’s right. She had hands. And arms, and legs. Feet. Muscles and bones. All parts of her body that had been forgotten to her before.

Blinking up into an overcast sky, she realized that she was outside. She stood up slowly, taking in her surroundings. She was in the middle of a paved road, lined on both sides by lush, green hills. A hazy mist blanketed everything in sight, creating a vision so surreal she wondered if she could be dreaming.

“Ye look a wee bit lost, lass.”

She snapped her head towards the deep, warm voice, realizing it belonged to a man. A man with thick black hair and a face so familiar it made her heart hurt. With a kind smile, he offered a hand.

“Let’s see if I can help ye find yer way.”

****

To Lambert Beauchamp, there were few things more important to him than manners. In every aspect of his life, both professional and personal, he strived for consideration and politeness.

That being said, nothing irked him more than those who failed to extend him similar courtesies.

Mr. Cameron had been showing him the vast estate attached to Castle Leoch when he abruptly excused himself, claiming that he’d return shortly. He’d driven off in the ATV they’d taken on their tour, leaving Lamb stranded in the middle of the Highlands.

It’d been well over an hour now and his cell phone, drained as it was of battery, was useless. He’d had no choice but to pick his way across the ruddy terrain and hope to run into civilization at some point. He cursed when he stepped in a puddle, ruining his brand new loafers.
“These are Italian leather, for Christ’s sake,” he grumbled, hiking up his pant leg as he trundled on.

When he finally came to a road, he saw no cars. With a sigh, he hobbled along on the shoulder with one eye on the rapidly setting sun.

A little while later, he was met with good fortune. A beat up old truck came thundering down the quiet road, its engine rattling and gasping. Lamb waved his arms and the truck slowed, coming to a stop beside him. A petite young woman with dark hair and chestnut eyes sat in the driver’s seat. Rolling down the window, she peered at him cautiously.

“Are ye alright?”

He flashed a charming smile, hoping to show that he meant her no ill will. Having a niece not much older than her, he knew she’d likely be wary of offering assistance to a strange man on the side of the road— as she should be.

“I’m afraid I’m rather lost.” He held up his dead mobile phone. “And my cell phone has run out of battery. Could I borrow your phone and call for some help?”

She pursed her lips. “Wouldna do ye any good all the way out here. The service is shite.”

“Oh. I see.” He cleared his throat. “It’s just that I’ve left my niece alone. This place is unfamiliar to her. I don’t want her to be worried.”

For a long moment, she studied him. And then, having come to some sort of decision, she jerked a nod towards the seat beside her. “My house is about fifteen miles from here. You can charge up yer phone, and we have a landline ye can use in the meantime.”

Blowing out a sigh of relief, he scurried around to the passenger side before she could change her mind. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“What’d you say your name was again?” she asked as he put on his seatbelt.

She tugged at the gear shift. “Jenny Murray.”

****

Claire walked beside the mysterious man as they continued to stroll down the haze-covered country road. She kept expecting a car to eventually pass by, but one never did. In fact, there didn’t seem to be a single other person anywhere.

She peered at him out of the corner of her eye. “You’re Brian Fraser.”

His smile was instant and wide, stretching across his weathered face. “Am I?”

“Yes,” she said with calm certainty. Strange, since it seemed only a moment ago she didn’t even know who she was. “Jamie showed me a picture of you once. But even if he hadn’t, I’d know. You look just like him.”

Brian’s expression was one of delighted surprise. “Ye think so? Everyone always said he took after my wife.”

She shook her head. “The eyes and the hair maybe. The rest is all you.”

They walked on in silence for a time, before Claire finally managed to ask the question that’d been burning a hole in her throat. “Am I dead?”

“Nae, lassie,” he said gently.

“Then what am I doing here?”

“Just popping in for a visit, I expect.” He winked at her before becoming a touch more somber. “Ye were badly hurt, lass. Ye’ll be alright in the end. Ye just have to bide here for a time.”
She ran a hand over her stomach, searching for the source of the phantom pain. She’d been shot. She remembered now. “But why?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes the mind needs to leave the body for a bit. Give it room to heal.”

Claire opened her mouth to ask more, but the words died on her tongue as they rounded a winding curve and she caught a shock of red hair.

The breath left her in an instant as she jogged forward, panic lacing her movement. As she got closer, though, she slowed. That wasn’t Jamie. Not her Jamie anyway. He was younger, maybe fifteen or so. His hair was long, curling down past his ears. She’d never realized his hair was naturally curly. He always wore it cropped so close to his head, never letting it grow out.

He sat on the ground with his head bent forward. A bicycle lay on its side a few feet away. His shoulders were shaking, his hands buried in his hair as he rocked himself back and forth. Claire lurched forward to comfort him.

“Jamie!”

He didn’t look up at the sound of her voice. And as she approached him, she noticed that he seemed to be shrouded in the haze — like she was seeing him through some sort of barrier.

“He cannae hear ye,” Brian said as he came to stand at Claire’s side.

“What is this?” Claire asked in a choked voice.

“It’s a place I come to be with my lad every now and again.” The sadness in his voice was grating. “After I died, he came here every day. I think he was forcing himself to relive it.”

Understanding hit her and she paled. “You mean this is where you….”

He nodded, grimly. “Aye.”
Claire looked back at the boy, sobbing like his heart was breaking all over again. Just watching him made the bullet in her belly feel like a mercy.

“Why would he do this to himself?”

“I guess he felt like he deserved it, after what happened,” Brian said. “Guilt like that is a heavy cross to bear.”

“But it wasn’t his fault!” Claire yelled, suddenly outraged.

He shrugged. “Doesna matter. Sometimes a soul wants forgiveness. It doesna always make sense. Jamie wants it from me. From his Mam. Maybe even from St. Germain. But I think the only person he really needs it from is himself.”

Claire looked back at the young version of Jamie. So alone. So scared. And so horribly sad.

“Ye’ll be leaving this place soon,” Brian said in a rough voice. “Will ye give Jamie a message for me?”

“Of course.”

“Tell him that his Da loves him.” His dark eyes filled with tears. “That I miss him. And that I’m so verra proud of the man he’s become.”

She had to swallow hard past the lump in her throat. “I will.”

“I’m verra grateful for ye, a leannan.” He gave her a watery smile. “Ye’ll make my lad whole again.”

“I want to,” she choked out through tears. “I want that... more than anything.”
She cried harder and he reached up to cup her cheek, swiping away her tears with his thumb. “I ken that. Dinna weep.”

“What if I can’t do it? What if I’m not enough?” She hiccupped. “What if he’s lost too much to ever be happy again?”

Brian smiled sadly. “Oh, lassie.”

His hand left her face, dropping down to the St. Anthony medal she wore at her neck, taking it between his thumb and forefinger. “Nothing is ever truly lost. Only changed.”

“That’s the First Law of Thermodynamics,” she said with a half-smile and a loud sniff.

“Nae.” He released the necklace, and slowly backed away from her. “That’s faith.”

****

Seven days. It had been seven endless and agonizing days.

Jamie sat in his usual spot at Claire’s bedside with his head resting on his folded arms.

“Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.”

Since the clock had just struck noon, he repeated the command twelve times. It was a bizarre little game he’d come up with somewhere in the haze of his sleepless delirium. When the clock struck one in an hour’s time, he’d say the words just once. And then twice at two. Three times at three, and so on and so forth.

“Is it noon already?” Lamb said from the corner, having counted along as Jamie spoke.

Having sat vigil together for a week now, the two men had formed an unspoken bond. Jamie, feeling like the world was ending, had initially been a little put off by Lamb’s forced cheerfulness. When he
finally made it to the hospital, from God knows where, Claire’s uncle had taken it all in in a soldiering sort of stride. He acted as though Claire’s recovery was a foregone conclusion, as though she weren’t still fighting for her life. He left the hospital at least once a day to shower, shave, and change clothes; he went on with his business as though nothing was wrong.

In time though, Jamie had seen the fear and pain flash in Lamb’s kind brown eyes. That the man loved his niece more than life was clear to everyone, as was the fact that he was near out of his mind with anguish — he was just keeping it all bottled up. The English were funny that way.

Jamie, on the other hand, was barely hanging on to sanity and he didn’t care who knew it. He’d showered and changed only once, while Claire was in surgery, just to get out of the clothes that were stained with her blood. Since the moment she was wheeled into the ICU, he’d left her only when he absolutely had to and never for more than five minutes at a time.

On the first night, a nurse named Kyle had tried to get him to leave claiming that visiting hours were over. Jamie threatened to arrest him, along with anyone else who ever mentioned the words ‘visiting hours’ to him again.

On the third day, a different nurse named Becca came into Claire’s room in a pair of baby pink scrubs. She smiled brightly at Jamie and he promptly burst into tears. He cried so hard and for so long that Becca eventually swore she’d never wear pink again.

Yeah. The man was an absolute wreck.

He sat up and scratched at his seven-day beard. Lamb was in his usual chair in the corner, his daily crossword puzzle set aside as he looked at his watch. “I’ve got to pop out. I promised a work colleague I’d call with an update.”

As he stood, he shrugged into a trendy brown corduroy jacket. “You’ll be here for the foreseeable future I presume?”

Jamie merely grunted in response.

“Well just so you know, we might be having a few visitors.” He paused next to Claire, bending down to press a kiss to her forehead and run a hand over her hair. “The young lady I met last week when I was stranded has been checking in. She mentioned she might drop in with a few homemade treats.”
He patted Jamie on the shoulder. “Try not to talk her ear off, hmm?”

The sarcasm wasn’t lost on Jamie, but he didn’t respond to it. He didn’t look away from Claire as the door open and closed.

Seven days. Seven fucking days. Why was she still asleep? The doctors had said it could take some time. that the coma was her body’s way of healing. She’d been shot three times in the stomach; the fact that she was alive at all was nothing short of a miracle. Her heart had stopped twice — once in the ambulance and once on the operating table.

The fact that her heart had actually stopped confused Jamie. If it had, shouldn’t his have stopped as well? It didn’t seem possible that his heart could continue to beat if hers wasn’t beating too.

“Jamie.”

He blinked. Once. Twice.

He looked at Claire, willed her eyes to open. But they remained closed.

Christ, he was losing his mind. It sounded so real. He’d almost believed she’d—

“Jamie.”

This time, he saw it. He saw her lips move as they whispered his name. His heart hammered in his chest as he rose shakily to his feet. She hadn’t opened her eyes. But she had said his name.

“Claire?”

He waited, daring to hope, and then—

“Jamie.”
He stared at her, his body frozen. And then he sprung into action.

“She said my name!” he yelled, even though the room was empty. He yelled it again, this time even louder as he pushed the call button again and again. “Someone—I need—I dinna—”

The door flew open and Kyle jogged to his side. “What’s happened?”

He grabbed Kyle by the shoulders and shook him. “She said my name!”

The nurse looked at Claire and then back at Jamie before sprinting out of the room.

Jamie leaned in over Claire, kissing her lips again and again. “Ye said my name. Say it again.”

He heard the door open just as she spoke. “Jamie.”

His chest burst open with joy as he turned to the stampede of nurses and doctors that flooded the room. “Did ye hear that? Ye heard it right?”


He was eventually pried away from Claire’s bedside by Becca, who was wearing a pair of pale blue scrubs.

“Claire said my name!” he told her, even as she dragged him from the room.

“She sure did, big guy,” Becca said with a fond smile, pulling him out into the hall. “Sit tight out here while we run some tests.”

Jamie nodded. “She said my name. She did.”
Leaning back against the wall, he put his hands over his face and tried his best to stay calm. All he wanted to do was bust back through that door and—

“Jamie?”

The hand dropped from his face and he straightened. Maybe he was actually going crazy. Surely he was hearing things now. That voice belonged to someone long lost to him.

“Is it really you?”

When he turned, he expected to see an empty hallway, nothing more than evidence of his deteriorating sanity.

Instead, he saw his sister Jenny. A bit older, maybe, than when he’d last seen her; but it was definitely her, carrying a basket of muffins.

“Jenny.” He was half-sure he was still hallucinating. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to visit a man named Beauchamp. His niece is a patient here.” She swallowed, her eyes running over him. “What are you—”

“Claire. Lamb’s niece. She’s… “ He frowned. Though they’d never expressly defined their relationship, girlfriend didn’t seem right. It wasn’t enough. But then, what was, when it came to defining what Claire meant to him?

“She’s mine,” he said at last.

He looked at his sister again, and that’s when it hit him. Jenny really was here. She must’ve been the young woman Lamb met when he was stranded in the Highlands.

She was here and she hated him. She did, didn’t she? He’d brought so much shame to their family.
He steeled himself, bracing for her anger, for her disgust.

The basket full of muffins dropped to the floor and then she was in his arms, wetting the fabric of his t-shirt with happy tears.

He held her close and pressed his face to her hair. “I’m so sorry, Jenny.”

She shook her head, pulling back to look at him. “Shh, mo chridhe.”

The endearment lanced his heart, and for a minute, he couldn’t breathe.

“Do ye no’ hate me then?” He took in her tear-stained face, brushing away stands of black hair.

“I was so sure ye would. After what happened with Da and then Mam— Christ. I’m so sorry I left ye to go through that alone. I should ha’ been there when she was sick. I should ha’ been beside ye, holding yer hand when ye buried her.”

Her brows furrowed in a frown. “Jamie. What are you talking about?”

“Mr. Fraser?” Dr. Hunter was letting himself out of Claire’s room.

Jamie went rigid, squeezing Jenny’s shoulder in acknowledgement as he released her. “How is she? Is she waking up?”

The doctor nodded and gave him a kind smile. “It looks that way. But it’s too soon to tell. These next few hours will likely be touch and go. The fact that she’s responding even a little bit tells us that she’s at least somewhat conscious of what’s happening around her. It’d be a good idea for you to sit with her. Talk with her some if you can.”

Jamie turned to his sister. “Jenny…. I— I have to—”

She smiled at him through a haze of tears. “Go.”
He hugged her again and pressed a hard kiss to her crown before he walked away. Seeing his sister again, seeing the love she bore him shining in her eyes, healed something inside of him. But he couldn’t dwell on that just now. Not when the love of his life lay in a hospital bed, needing him.

After settling in his usual chair by her bed, he took her hand. Her mouth twitched slightly at the contact and Jamie realized what the doctor had meant. She was trying to wake up. She just needed a little help.

“Claire. It’s Jamie.” He took a deep breath. “I’ve been waiting seven days now for ye to open yer eyes and I dinna think I can stand it any more.”

He watched her for a moment, but she didn’t respond. Not the slightest bit deterred, he pushed on.

“Ye said I had to come up with something I like about myself, aye?” He sniffed. “Once every day? I’ve kept my promise.”

He took the little notepad that one of the nurses had brought for him out of his pocket and flipped to the first page. Just like he said, he’d kept his promise.

Every day, for seven days, he’d kept his promise.

“I like that I can make ye laugh.
I like that I ken what yer favorite sandwich is.
I like that I can always tell what ye’re thinking.
I like that I’m the only one who kens how to rub yer neck the way ye like.
I like that I make ye feel safe.
I like that I make ye happy.”

Saying the words out loud hit him harder than he expected. He paused for a minute, swallowing back the overwhelming emotion swelling up in his throat.

“And I like that I’m ….. “ His lower lip trembled. “I like that I’m good enough to deserve ye.”
The words hung in the air like a confession, and he felt the weight of it leave his chest in benediction.

“Do ye hear me, Sassenach?” Tossing the notepad aside, he pressed his lips to her hand. “I’m good enough to love ye and I’m gonna do it every day for the rest of my life.”

He leaned forward, making his voice as stern as he could manage. “So, you are going to wake up. Ye’re gonna open yer eyes. And ye’re gonna talk to me. Aye?”

“Aye.”

He froze. “Claire?”

Her mouth twitched again and this time he knew it was a smile. “Hmmm?”

“Open yer eyes,” he begged. “Please.”

Her lids fluttered for a second. Jamie held his breath. After what felt like long, endless minutes, they slowly pried open. The whiskey in her eyes poured into him like a drug and he cried out. “Oh, Christ.”

He shook violently as he leaned forward, taking his first deep breath in seven days. “Ye scared me so bad.”

Resting his forehead against hers, he let hot tears flow, wiping away the ones that dropped on her face.

A faint lined formed between her fine brows. “M’sorry.”

He nodded, shaking even harder when he felt the touch of her hand on his cheek. “Don’t do it again.”

“I won’t.” Her eyes flicked drowsily around the room in a lazy, dazed appraisal as she slowly rose
“What day is it?”

“Ye’ve been out for a week,” he said, voice shaking. “It’s Monday.”

She smirked. “Monday… as in Monday? Or Monday as in Wednesday?”

His barking laugh turned quickly into a racking sob as he buried his face in the crook of her neck.

****

That night, Jamie was allowed to have a cot moved into Claire’s room, where he proceeded to sleep for a full twelve hours. When he woke, Claire talked him into a quick trip to Lamb’s hotel for a shower and change of clothes.

The thirty minutes he was gone felt too long, and by the time he was running down the hallway towards her room, panic was seeping into his gut. What if she’d slipped away again while he was gone?

Heart pounding, he burst into her room, letting out a sigh of relief when he saw Claire sitting up in bed. Lamb sat on one side of her and on the other… was his sister?

He’d called her yesterday, a few hours after Claire woke up, and she’d promised to visit soon. He didn’t realize she meant the very next day, but he was thrilled to see her nonetheless.

“Jenny.” He smiled. “When did ye—”

“Jamie.” He looked at Claire and suddenly noticed how pale she was. And were those tears in her eyes? “She didn’t come alone.”

When he turned around, his heart stopped.

She sat in a chair against the wall, her red hair draped over her shoulder in a long braid. Her graceful hands were folded neatly in her lap and her eyes remained unfocused, looking at nothing in
particular, even as she turned her head towards the sound of voices.

“Jamie? Is that you?”

The way she said his name, filled with love and hope, made his chest feel tight.

“Mam?”

He felt like he couldn’t breathe. *How was this possible?* Colum said she was dead. Had the bastard lied about *that, too*?

At the sound of his voice, she perked up, though her eyes remained unfocused and shrouded in an odd sort of haze. “Come closer.”

He stumbled towards her, the scent of roses and woodsmoke hitting him like a ton of bricks. He knew that smell. That was Mam’s smell.

With a sob, he fell to his knees at her feet. Tears slipped down her face as she cupped one of his cheeks.

“Ye’re a man now, mo chridhe,” she said thickly, tracing the lines of a face she didn’t need eyes to see. “And sae handsome. Just like yer da.”

He choked out a wounded, broken sound, staring up at his mother’s face. “Can ye forgive me for it?”

Pain shuttered over her face and she took his hands and held them tight. “I should’ve realized ye’d blame yerself. I was so lost in my grief. But that’s no excuse…” She paused on a long shuddering breath before reaching up and taking hold of his chin, forcing him to look at her, even though their eyes didn’t meet.

“What happened to yer father was not yer fault.” She spoke intentionally, *deliberately*, like she’d been wanting to say the words forever. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell ye so. I’m sorry I let ye believe it for even a second.”
It was a long time before he could speak again.

“But I… I’ve done other things. I was so lost for so long and I…” His vision blurred with tears as he spoke again in a much smaller voice. “I’ve done some things ye might not be able to forgive.”

“Oh, Jamie,” she half-laughed, half-sobbed. “You are my son. My baby boy.”

Taking his face in both hands, she let her thumbs run over the arches of his cheeks. “There is nothing ye could do that I couldna forgive.”

Without another word, Jamie Fraser put his head in his mother’s lap and finally cried his pain away.

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