Double Agent

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Summary

Two of my favorite fandoms collide - the story of Alias told with the characters of Outlander! Claire Beauchamp's life is full of secrets. When one decision crumbles her world around her, she must lean on old relationships and new allies to find justice and reclaim her life.
Claire Beauchamp was SURE she was failing her test.

Her professor stood in front of her, impatiently tapping his foot as she continued frantically writing in her test booklet. The room was nearly empty, her friend Geillis and her other classmates having departed long ago. “Time’s up,” he reminded her again. She scribbled out the end of her last answer and reluctantly handed her booklet to her professor.

“I know I failed,” she lamented to her boyfriend Frank as they walked across campus later that day. Frank was an associate professor of history at Inverness College where Claire was taking graduate courses in botany. “I’m sure you didn’t fail. You’ve never failed at anything in your life,” he replied distractedly. As they walked, he looked for something in his bag.

“Well there’s a first time for everything. I just wasn’t prepared. I didn’t have time.”

“Claire, we’ve talked about this,” he said, exasperated. “Just quit the bank. It takes up way too much of your time considering you don’t want to be a banker for the rest of your life.” Claire couldn’t even count the number of times she had heard that argument in the two years she and Frank were dating. She was also getting increasingly annoyed by the fact that he couldn’t stop digging around in his bag. Finally, he stopped and put the bag on the ground, continuing to root around as if she wasn’t even there.

“What on earth is so important in there?” she asked, with no little hint of accusation in her tone.

And suddenly, she realized that he was holding a box. And he was on one knee.

“Claire,” he said, his voice barely penetrating her shock, “you know how long I waited for you. How I longed to be near you almost from the first time we met. These past two years with you have been like a dream. I want that dream to continue for the rest of our lives.” And he opened the box and now she really struggled to hear him over the buzzing in her ears. The sparkle of diamond, the sheen of gold. “Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp, will you marry me?”

As tears welled in her eyes, she couldn’t bear to be standing over him anymore, even though it probably wasn’t traditional. She knelt in front of him so they were eye to eye, so he could see the depth of feeling that poured out from hers. “Yes,” she said firmly. People around them on campus had stopped to look at the spectacle they created and some were even cheering. She barely noticed. She felt his arms around her, his whispers of love in her ear, and she felt peaceful and content. She felt safe. At the same time, she was afraid. So afraid. How could she marry him if he didn’t know the truth?

The next day, Claire walked into her office building with a distinct bounce in her step and a lightness in her heart. Geillis had fawned over the ring and they’d had a good cry together over how happy her parents would have been for her. Claire knew that Geillis hadn’t always been a huge fan of her relationship with Frank. She said theirs was not a great passion but a relationship of security and stability for Claire after a lifetime of wandering. But, she seemed willing to put her reservations aside at the prospect of helping Claire plan her wedding. As Claire boarded the executive elevator at Credit Guépard and chatted with Patrick, the guard on duty, she held her hands behind her back and quietly slipped the ring off her finger. She just wasn’t ready for the questions yet, felt like she wanted to hold her happiness to herself for a while longer before letting it interact with her work life. She got off the
elevator, paused in the scanning room, and then waited as the secret door slowly swung open. This was the part of her life that no one outside this building knew, the part that she had to keep locked away from almost everyone she cared about in the world.

Joe suspected almost immediately that something was different about her. “What’s up?” he said to her after she had been standing at his desk barely a minute. “What? Nothing’s up,” she replied, a bit too quickly. “You’re glowing,” he said with a tease in his voice and a smirk on his face. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said as she rolled her eyes at him and turned to walk away. “Ok, LJ. Head for the briefing room- Randall wants to see us.” He turned to Malcolm Grant, whose desk was directly behind his. “Is she glowing?” “Aye, that she is,” he said loudly. Claire simply threw her arms in the air, shrugged her shoulders and kept walking.

Joe met her in the briefing room a few minutes later. Her boss, Jonathan Randall and their technology guru, Ned Gowan, were already there when she arrived. Randall explained that they would be going to a reception in Taiwan. They would be doing reconnaissance on the building as it was a front for Taiwanese intelligence. A scientist had been working with the Taiwanese on the development of a new type of battery, but he wanted to turn it over to the West. The scientist had never arrived at his scheduled meet, so no one had any idea if he had completed his work or even if he was still alive. Ned went over the tech they would be taking with them and Randall said they were leaving the following day.

After work that evening, Claire was relaxing on the couch in her flat while Frank was poring over a stack of books at the kitchen table preparing for his next lecture on the Jacobite rebellion. Claire looked over at him and felt a wave of tenderness wash over her. The two of them met when she was an undergraduate and she had refused to date him until she graduated. Even though they were in completely different departments, Claire never wanted anyone to think that she hadn’t earned the degree she worked so hard to achieve. Now all of that was behind them and they were preparing to start their life together. As if he had felt her eyes on him, he looked up and instantly comprehended what her look meant. He rose from the table and climbed over the back of the sofa, bringing his body flush with hers and pulling the pillow from under her head so she was flat beneath him. Their lips met and then he began trailing kisses slowly down her torso until he paused at her stomach, lifting her shirt so he could caress the skin beneath. “Just think,” he said with soft wonder. “Someday there’s going to be a baby in there.”

Claire froze. It wasn’t that she and Frank had never discussed children, it just had never felt so immediate before. It took her barely a moment, but she made her decision. She had to tell him the truth. There was no way she could marry this man without letting him see all of her. She pushed up quickly and took his hand as she came to her feet. As she led him to the bathroom, she cranked up the volume on the stereo that had been playing low in the background. She could never be sure she was safe from listening ears. When she reached the shower, she started to undress and quietly told him to do the same. He excitedly did as she bade him, thinking he knew exactly what was coming next. Claire stood under the water for a brief moment as he climbed in after her, letting it calm her. As he reached for her, she put a hand on his chest and stilled him. “I work for MI-6,” she blurted out with no preamble. He laughed, as if she couldn’t possibly be serious. “I am an operations officer for MI-6.” She said it again, this time more forcefully. She had to show him that she was deadly serious. His face was confusion, pain, and as she tried to continue explaining, anger. She pleaded with him to let her explain, but he was past hearing her. He quickly climbed out of the shower, got dressed without even drying off first, and left. Even over the stereo and the shower, Claire could hear the sound of the door slamming behind him.
Before she left on her trip the next day, Claire knew she had to see Frank. She texted him and asked him to meet her at the battlefield at Culloden. She needed open space where they could talk without fear of being overheard. To her relief, he responded quickly and agreed to meet her after his morning class ended. They walked out onto the battlefield together, side by side but not touching, in total silence. Past the monuments of the fallen clans. No one else in sight. The air seemed alive with the eerie silence that was a permanent part of this place. He abruptly stopped walking and turned to face her. “Alright. Tell me.”

With a deep breath, Claire began. “I had just started university. I was studying on campus one day when a man approached me. He told me they were interested in talking to me about a job. He gave me his card and left. You know how lost I was when I first arrived here- I didn’t feel like I belonged anywhere after having traveled around all my life with Uncle Lamb. So, I decided to call them. When I asked them why they wanted me, all they told me was that I fit a profile. Eventually, I asked if I could test for agent training. The test was easy and I advanced quickly. I was assigned to a covert branch of MI-6 called OB8- OB stands for Off-Book.”

“A covert branch?” he asked, unbelieving. He looked at her like she was a total stranger. She supposed she was, in a way, but it terrified her. “Frank, ever since my parents died, I’ve been hoping that I would be able to find a person who would help give my life meaning. I believe that person is you. I just happened to meet the agency first.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I need to think. I need to walk for a while.”

Claire paused- she still had to tell him the most important thing. “Frank, you can’t tell anyone about this.” He nodded and waved his hand as if it was obvious. “I’m serious, Frank. You cannot say a word about this to anyone.”

“I got it,” he told her. There was almost no emotion in his voice. She couldn’t get a sense of what he was thinking or feeling. She didn’t want to leave things unsettled with him, but she was also running out of time. “I have to leave for my trip,” she said. “I will call you when I get back.” They stood and looked at each other for a long minute. Finally, in a voice almost too low to hear, Frank said, “Be careful.” She nodded and then turned to head back to her car.

On the plane to Taiwan, Claire sat next to Joe catching up on her studying for her favorite class about the medicinal uses of plants and herbs. Joe looked over at her and said, “You know Randall doesn’t like it. The fact that you’re still in school.”

“I know,” Claire sighed. “He would rather none of us have a life on the outside. It doesn’t matter though- I’m not giving it up.” She looked over at her work partner, a man she regularly trusted with her life. Might as well come straight out with it. “Joe, how long have you and Gail been married?”

Joe looked up as he searched his mind for the answer. “Ten years,” he said slowly. “No, eleven.” He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe it had been that long. Joe was an expat, an American by birth. He had come to Scotland as an exchange student when he was in university. He met Gail and it was love at first sight. He transferred schools, they got married shortly after and he never looked back. He had even officially changed his citizenship, which was how he was able to enter the service of Her Majesty’s government. Claire looked at him with interest. “And in all that time, you never . . .” She let the thought trail off, but he caught her meaning.

“Gail is married to an investment banker who loves his job,” he said firmly. “But don’t you feel like you’re lying to her?” Claire asked. “I’m protecting her from the truth,” he said simply. “After all, if
there’s a rule you don’t break, that’s the rule you don’t break.’’ Claire hesitated before responding, “It must just get easier I suppose.” Joe gave her a long, searching look, but said nothing. They fell back into silence.

The mission was a success- although it was much “cleaner” than many of their missions. No fighting, no shooting. Just gathering intelligence. Claire had seen the lab, taken pictures (Ned’s 3D camera hidden in her lipstick was genius), and even seen the device itself. But since they were given strict instructions not to take anything, there it stayed. There was one tense moment when she thought her cover was blown. But she improvised being lost looking for the bathroom and managed to get away unscathed. It was, Claire knew, the most important thing she took with her every time she went out in the field- her mind. Her ability to think quickly and adapt to changing circumstances had kept her alive more times than she could count. She said goodbye to Joe at the gate and climbed in the taxi to head for home. When she turned on her phone, she had a message from Frank. Her stomach churned. But she couldn’t help her quick smile when she heard his voice- he was definitely drinking when he called her.

“Oh God. They knew. Claire was trying to hold herself together as the cab pulled up to the curb outside of Frank’s building. She shoved her fare at the driver, grabbed her bags and ran for the door, the phone still at her ear.

“How much longer? How many more blocks? Was there a chance he hadn’t gone home? ‘Please don’t be home,” she pleaded silently.

“After all, one can’t be a spy forever. At a certain point, one has to be able to say that they used to be a spy, right?”

She turned the key. Chaos. The place had been tossed. Furniture overturned. Pictures broken. They wanted it to look like a robbery. She walked through the living room and past the kitchen- no sign of him. Maybe he really wasn’t home. Maybe they hadn’t found him. Maybe he was hiding somewhere. Past the bedroom. No Frank. Around the corner and into the bathroom. All she saw was his face and the blood. She knelt next to the bathtub as her eyes flooded with tears and her mouth opened and closed uselessly. As soon as she touched him, she knew he was gone. He was cold. So cold. He had been shot several times at close range. His face was still his beloved face, but his eyes were forever closed to her. Dimly she heard a horrific sound, almost inhuman. It was a shriek and a cry and a scream and a moan all in one and it went on and on and she wondered where it was coming from and if it would ever stop. At some point she realized it was coming from her.
Looking back, she had almost no memory of how she made it back to her place. How she climbed in her car and drove to work. How she walked into the building, past security, past her stunned coworkers working the night shift, and into Jonathan Randall’s office. But she would remember with perfect clarity until the end of her life every moment of her time in his office that night.

“What did you do?” she asked, a note of pleading in her voice that there was some other possible explanation for what she had just seen. She had not changed clothes. She was vaguely aware that she was covered in Frank’s blood. There could be no doubt in Randall’s mind what she was talking about. He said simply, “Security Section became aware of a breach and performed their function. You knew the codes of conduct, Agent Beauchamp. You knew those codes applied to you, even as you broke them and put every person in this office at risk.” Claire could not stop her voice from shaking as she sank down in a chair in front of his desk. She suddenly felt unsure how much longer her legs would hold her. “Frank wasn’t a risk. He was just a man. He was a good man. He wasn’t a threat to anyone.”

He stood up and came around the desk to stand in front of her. “Information about this agency must be treated like a virus. Any release of that information has only one solution- containment. We have a responsibility to this country, to the agency, and to the people we work alongside to be ever vigilant. As much as I wish that there could have been another solution, we simply could not—“ Claire slammed to her feet and pushed him back on his desk with her forearm just below his throat. “Stop saying WE. Stop talking about THE AGENCY. You killed the man I love.”

“No, Agent Beauchamp. You did.”

She slowly pulled back from him and turned to walk out of his office, only realizing at the last moment that he had sealed the doors. “Let me out.” Her voice dripped with anger and disgust. She wouldn’t have been surprised if he could see it rolling off her in waves. She had never hated anyone in her life. But she hated him, this man she had once respected. “I’m sorry, Agent Beauchamp, but I can’t do that. You see, you are now a risk, too. MacCullough is waiting for you in Security Section— you will have to be cleared before you can leave this building.”

The questions went on for hours, although Claire had little to no sense of time passing. Simple fact questions first, then probing deeper into questions of loyalty, motivation. She answered in monosyllables. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d slept. She didn’t know if she would ever sleep again. She didn’t know if she would ever close her eyes and not see Frank’s body. She didn’t know if she was going to be allowed to walk out of the building alive. Finally, she was left alone. She saw MacCullough talking to Randall and before she knew it, she was walking towards her car. It was early morning in Inverness. Claire lay her arms on the steering wheel, lay her head down, and wept, her whole body shaking with it until she had absolutely nothing left.
The memorial service was on a Tuesday and was filled with Frank’s students and colleagues from the university. Frank’s parents came up from Sussex- they were taking his body home to bury him in the family plot. They weren’t a particularly close family and Claire had only met them a handful of times, so everything felt heavy and awkward. The history department had graciously offered to put up a memorial in the courtyard next to their building so at least Claire would still have a place to visit locally when she needed to feel close to him. Uncle Lamb showed up, but he stayed at a distance, like always. It was just as well- Claire had no energy to try to bridge that gap just then. He raised her after her parents died when she was five and she traveled the world with him on his archeological digs. But ever since they had come to Scotland when Claire started university, their relationship had been distant. Geillis was Claire’s rock, never far from her side and offering hugs, hand squeezes, and a seemingly never-ending supply of whiskey. It all felt like a dream, like it was happening to someone else. Thankfully it was summer, so she had some time before she had to figure out how to somehow climb back into her life.

Months later, Claire was sitting in class when she heard her phone buzz. Randall was trying to text her. Again. She looked at her phone briefly and then put it back in her bag. When class ended, she was heading across campus to the library when she looked up and was startled to see Joe getting out of his car. They exchanged small talk- she told him she was doing better but he knew it wasn’t the whole truth. And she knew the real reason why he was there anyway.

“Randall needs you to come back. They gave you one month and you’ve been gone three. They’re finally ready to go after the battery in Taiwan and he wants you for the job.”

“They don’t need me for that. Someone else can do it.”

“He believes he does. Claire, you know you can’t go on this way. You are in way too deep. And if they don’t have confidence in you, in your loyalty and commitment to them . . . then they will solve that problem.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I can’t.” She reached out to lay a hand on his arm, willing him to understand. “I’ll see you.”

“Claire,” he called out to her. But she was already walking away.

After the library, Claire spent some solitary time (which was a lot of her time these days, if she was honest with herself) at her favorite coffee shop. The tea soothed her, but she couldn’t help but notice that she was surrounded by couples. Much as she hated it, she couldn’t shake her self-pity so she decided to head home. She walked through the parking garage and climbed in her car. She would never know what made her pause as she went to start her car- it was simply instinct. Suddenly her window exploded in gunfire as she dove for cover onto the passenger seat. Without raising up, she stuck her key in the ignition, started the car, and threw it in reverse. She collided with the gunmen’s car- no escape that way, so while they fought through the confusion of the crash, she opened the passenger door, dove out of the car and ran. Down one level. On she ran. She could hear the screech of the tires coming behind her. Security Section had decided to solve the problem, the problem of their loose end- her. She tried a maintenance door- no luck. She dove behind a car, pulled her phone out of her purse, and called Geillis. “Geillis,” she whispered. “Can you hear me?”

“Och, Claire, why are ye so quiet? You willna believe the day I’ve had.”

“Geillis can you call me back? I think my ringer’s broken.”

“Aye, all right.”
“Ok.  Call me right back.”

The phone’s ringer sounded like a bullhorn in the silent parking garage. The gunman heard it and hurried towards the sound . . . and found the phone lying on the concrete, abandoned. In the next second, Claire’s leg connected with his arms and knocked the gun from his hands. They were both trained fighters and they went back and forth, using every tactic they knew. Claire had one thing her opponent did not- the desperation of knowing she was fighting for her life. A kick to the head and her attacker fell back into a car and collapsed to the ground. Claire walked over to retrieve her phone and heard cars approaching again with tires squealing. She grabbed her assailant’s gun and swung it towards the first car she saw. Behind the wheel was her Uncle Lamb. “GET IN!” he shouted out the open window. The man she fought off- his partner was still coming for her. There was no way she could process everything she was feeling and thinking and stay alive, so she let her body take over and did as she was told. Her uncle drove off and began loading a pistol while he was driving. The other security agent’s car was coming up fast behind them.

“What . . .” she started, then couldn’t get anything else out. “What is this?  Uncle Lamb?  What are you doing?”

“I’ll explain later. We have to get out of here first.” He drove down to the end of the row and turned the wheel hard so that the car spun to face the opposite direction. They were now driving head-on towards their pursuer. With his window down, Lamb stuck his gun out the window and opened fire. One, two, three, four, five shots . . . well-paced and steady, even while driving at high speed. Clearly, he had done this before. One of his shots found its target and the other car went out of control and crashed into a row of parked cars. As they left the garage, Lamb was the only one talking- Claire still couldn’t find her voice.

“We are going to meet a friend of mine. I’ve arranged a flight for you to Switzerland tonight. They will have your passport flagged at the airport so he will have new identity papers for you, too. You are going to have to disappear from there.”

“Wait a minute,” Claire finally managed. “You’re an archaeologist. How the bloody hell do you know about guns and fake identity papers and tactical driving and . . .” They pulled off the road and Lamb stopped the car. Down the road on the other side another parked car flashed its headlights at them.

“Claire, I am an archaeologist- and a spy. I work for OB8- archaeology is both a passion and a convenient front for that work. I’ve known Jonathan Randall for years- you actually met him once right after your parents died but you probably don’t remember.” Claire just stared. Then she reached out and started pushing on his face, convinced that he was wearing a mask, that he was an imposter. This couldn’t possibly be her Uncle Lamb. “Claire, we don’t have time for this. That car is going to take you to the airport, but they aren’t going to wait much longer. Tell me what you know about The Federation.”

Her head was a billiard ball on a table, careening in one direction then hitting a cushion and moving off toward another. How was she having this conversation with her uncle of all people? “The Federation is a group of intelligence agents from all over the world who went rogue. They’re mercenaries. They’re dangerous. They are enemies of Her Majesty’s government.”

“I’m one of them.” There was no way she could formulate a response to that even if he waited for a thousand years, so he kept going. “What I’m about to tell you is going to sound unbelievable but you’re going to have to trust me. OB8 is not a division of MI-6. OB8 is a part of The Federation. You’ve been lied to- all lower-level agents have. You are working for the very enemy you thought you were fighting. Now, you have to go.”
“So, you’re telling me that I work for the enemy . . . and that you ARE the enemy.” It was impossible. But somehow, she knew it was true. Fragments crystallized in her mind- the fact that she had never been to MI-6 Headquarters. Her uncle’s distance after they settled in Scotland. The brutality of Security Section and Frank’s death. “Claire, you have to go NOW.”

“How dare you. How dare you offer to help me as if you haven’t been lying to me all this time. How long? All my life? You know what, it doesn’t even matter. If you really want to help me, leave me alone.” She threw open the car door and ran as if the hounds of hell were at her heels.

When Geillis pulled out her book in the library the next day, a note fluttered to the floor. When she picked it up, she smiled. It said simply, “I’m on the roof. – C”

But when she reached the roof, her smile quickly vanished. She could easily see the bruises on Claire’s face. “Geillis, what’s happened to ye?”

“Geillis, I need you to listen to me and I need you to understand that I am not going to be able to answer all your questions right now. I need your help.” Her voice broke slightly, and she couldn’t prevent a few tears from escaping but she charged on. “I need to borrow one of your credit cards with a high limit- I promise I will pay you back. And I need to borrow your passport. Can you get them for me?”

“Claire, what is this about? Are ye in trouble- do ye owe someone money?”

“I promise I will explain everything one day. But I need to hurry. Can you meet me at the service station nearest the airport in an hour?” Geillis looked deeply concerned and she reached out to lay a hand on Claire’s arm. “Aye. I’ll be there.”

“One more thing, Geillis- bring your straightening iron.”
Two words: AGENT. JAMIE. (Thanks for your patience in waiting for the other half of our dynamic duo to arrive!)

In the service station bathroom, Claire got to work. A few years back, Geillis had gotten the ridiculous notion one night while drinking that she was going to dye her hair a bright flaming red. Claire was trying to duplicate that color (which had conveniently wound up memorialized on Geillis’ passport picture). The problem, as always, was her curls. Geillis had luxuriously straight hair that she could get even straighter with an iron. Claire’s hair was a mad mess of curls that she had waged war against all her life. But the only way this plan was going to work was if she could make herself look as much as possible like Geillis Duncan. A little bit of time and a whole lot of cursing later, she was as close as she was going to get. As she had done hundreds of times before on operations, she became Geillis as she strutted through the airport and bought a round-trip ticket to Taiwan. Claire had no idea how many laws she broke along the way, but finally she was back at the building she and Joe had scoped out months before. Before her world had crashed down around her. She broke in through a window on the roof and made her way back to the security door in the basement. Only this time, she was struggling to pick the lock. Just as she stepped back to figure out her next plan of attack, the butt of a rifle crashed into the side of her head and she fell into blackness.

When Claire awoke, she was drowning. Her lungs burned as her head was held under the water. She was never going to breathe again. This was the end. Finally, the guards pulled her out and threw her to the ground. She coughed and hacked and spit out water and took in huge gulps of air. They hauled her up, threw her into a chair and handcuffed her arms behind her. Claire didn’t know if she had ever been more frightened in her life. She was in enemy custody and she was completely alone. She had no backup. No one was coming for her. She was either going to find a way out of this herself or she was going to die- it was that simple. A man Claire recognized as the head Taiwanese security officer entered the room and held up a syringe. Some sort of truth serum, most likely. The two guards held her down while she struggled and fought but he eventually got past her defenses and plunged the needle into her neck. She felt herself being dragged under once again and gave herself up to it.

When she slowly regained consciousness, the two guards were gone and only the security officer was left. He pulled up a chair and sat directly in front of her. “Whoa,” she said and then giggled. Her head felt like it was floating detached from her body like a balloon on a string. She was very calm now. “Who do you work for?” he asked her slowly. “You got a pen?” He pulled out a small notebook and pen and sat, waiting. “Ok, write this down. F-F-O-R-G-U-B. You got that? Now, reverse it.”

BUGGER OFF. His face barely changed but Claire could tell he was furious. She couldn’t have cared less. “I’ve got bad news for you. I am your worst nightmare. I have absolutely nothing to lose.”

“Well, that’s not exactly true,” he said as he turned away briefly and came back with a small leather
case. When he opened it, he pulled out a long metal implement that looked like a small pair of pliers. “You have teeth.” At that moment, the two guards returned. He motioned them over and they stood at either side of Claire, holding her shoulders. As he approached, she stopped him by saying, “Hold on! Wait a minute!” He paused. “Could you do me a favor and start with the ones in the back?” He took one tool out of the case to force her mouth open and then reached toward the back of her mouth with the other tool. And then Claire knew nothing but pain and the sound of her own screaming.

Claire once again regained consciousness slowly, although she had no memory of passing out. She could feel the dried blood around her mouth. Her interrogator was still there and when he saw that she was awake he walked up to her with a small bottle. “These are pain pills,” he said. “I could tell that they worked to keep your pain under control because you stopped screaming so much. But they only last for about two hours. And it’s been almost two hours. So, you have a choice. You can either tell me who you work for and I will give you another pill; or I can take another tooth. It’s up to you.” Claire’s eyes started leaking tears and she looked up at him, pleading. “Please, I can’t.” He came close to her and leaned over so his face was directly in front of hers. “Who do you work for, you pretty little girl?”

Everything after that happened in a matter of seconds. She reared her head back and smashed into his, knocking him flat on his back. She stood and flipped forward so that the chair caged her interrogator to the ground. This also put her close enough to him that she was able to dig the keys to her handcuffs out of his pocket and free her hands. In no time she had completely turned the tables and had him handcuffed to the chair. The two guards returned but she fought them off and took their guns. Off she ran back to the security door which she simply shot her way through this time. Once back in the lab she disconnected the battery and wrapped it in a towel. The rest of the security forces in the building were alerted to her escape by now and the first two guards arrived. She quickly went through all her ammunition and was crouched behind a lab bench. The guards were blocking her only way out. She looked up and saw the gas line and had her answer. She grabbed a screwdriver, pried the line loose and snuck her way along the side of the room. The guards were coming from the other side. When she got near the exit, she stood. When the guards saw her and fired, the gas ignited, and she let the explosion cover her escape.

A world away, just as she had months before, Claire walked into her office at OB8 tired, disheveled, and covered in blood. She walked into Jonathan Randall’s office, set the towel down on his desk, unfolded it, and revealed the battery. She looked him in the eye and said simply, “I’m back.” He gave her a small but clearly delighted smile (over the battery, not her) and said, “All right.” She turned to walk away but then turned back. “I’m taking the week off, though. I have midterms.”

Across town at a non-descript, grey stone office building, Claire walked up to the receptionist at the desk in the front lobby. “I’m Claire Beauchamp. I’m here to see your director, Mr. Munro.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Munro is not available right now,” the woman said to her. “May I leave a message for him?”

“Please tell Mr. Munro that he has a walk-in.” The face of the receptionist changed immediately, and she picked up the phone. “We have a walk-in for Mr. Munro.” She walked around the desk and gestured for Claire to follow her. “Right this way, ma’am.” For the first time ever, Claire was in a real MI-6 office.
Agent James Fraser wove through a maze of desks carrying a paper cup of coffee and a plate of scones. He opened the door of the conference room and joined his partner (and brother-in-law), Agent Ian Murray. Their walk-in was sitting at the conference room table, head down, writing non-stop, almost frantically. Her clown-like red hair was practically glowing in the beige conference room and her curls were shooting off in every possible direction. She was, quite simply, a total mess. He met Ian’s eye and Ian simply shrugged back at him as if to say, “You haven’t missed a thing. She’s been like this since you left.” Jamie set down the plate and cup in front of her carefully. “Here’s some more food and some coffee for you, lass. If you need anything, please let Agent Murray know . . .”

“I need a new pen. This one’s dying,” she said quickly, not looking up and continuing to write. Jamie grabbed the pen that Ian held out to him. She paused just long enough to hold up the pen she was using, and he placed the new one in her hand, taking the other away. She was back to writing in an instant and still hadn’t looked up the whole time he had been in the room. Jamie was perfectly content to leave Ian on babysitting duty, so he quickly left the conference room.

Claire had written until her hand was nearly numb. But she told them everything. Now, she was waiting in Agent Fraser’s office. As angry as Claire still was with her uncle, she could acknowledge to herself that he had given her a new purpose that night when he told her the truth about OB8. She was going to make them pay. She was going to make them pay for lying to her, for lying to her friends, for using her for their own agenda. Above all, she was going to make them pay for what they did to Frank. And when she did, she was going to get out of this life. Frank was right—people weren’t spies forever. And she bloody well wasn’t going to be. She was exhausted and blurry with it, but as she waited, she noticed a picture on top of the low filing cabinet along the side wall of the office. It was a tall, strikingly handsome red-haired man (Fraser?) and a short, dark-haired woman (Wife? Girlfriend?). Whatever their relationship, they were clearly close. They had their arms wrapped around each other and something had made them both laugh because their faces were alive with it. The picture intrigued her and made her smile, but Claire had no more time to ponder because as he entered his office and walked past her chair Agent Fraser put his hand on the frame and turned it so she couldn’t see it anymore. 

Plays things close to the vest, Claire thought to herself. But no ring, she also noted. So, the woman in the picture wasn’t his wife. Probably.

When he sat down behind his desk, he smiled at her. The strikingly handsome man in the picture was only more so in the flesh. But Claire was running on empty, so she asked the one thing that mattered to her at that moment. “So, am I in?”

“It’s going to take us a bit to review your statement. You wrote a lot.”

“I know,” she said as she looked down at her lap. “I’ve read novels that weren’a so long,” he said, and she could tell that he was teasing her a bit and she managed a small smile, although it hurt her mouth terribly. “It will certainly be a big help to have another double agent inside OB8, ye ken.”

“Another?” Her head snapped up and she looked him in the eye. They were blue, she noted. Gorgeously deep in color and nearly hypnotic but also not easy to read. “Are you trying to play me? Because it seems to me that you wouldn’t tell me that unless you had already decided to let me in. Unless, of course, you suspect me of trying to be a triple agent, in which case I would report back to my agency the presence of a mole.”

“I’m not trying to play you, lass. I’ve an instinct about you.” He smiled again and she could sense the kindness in it. Her emotions were so close to breaking that she had to look away again before everything bubbled over and she simply lost control. “Now, do you need a dentist?” he asked. “I’ve
one I can recommend if you do.” She shook her head and said, “No, I’ve got one. Thank you.” Claire had no idea if she would ever see him again, but she found herself hoping she would.

Claire stood in silence at the newly-erected memorial outside the history building on campus. The simple bronze plaque at the base said, “In memory of Professor Frank Wolverton. Forever in our hearts.” She knelt and ran her fingers over it and felt a sense of sadness but also calm. She was connected to him here, almost as if he was about to walk out the door and meet her after his class. She felt someone behind her and turned and stood to face her Uncle Lamb. “I thought I might find you here,” he said. “I wanted to tell you how sorry I am.”

“There’s no need. I’m back at work now- you probably knew that. I’m doing what I’m doing now because I have to.”

“No, I meant I’m sorry about Frank.” He gestured to the memorial. “I’d like to be alone, if you don’t mind,” she said.

“I asked Munro if I could come and give you this in person,” he said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone. “You’re in. They verified your statement. I read what you wrote. I saw that you didn’t mention my name at all. That was . . . kind.”

She spoke slowly, with dawning realization of what he was telling her. “You’re the other double agent.” But she still hadn’t reached for the phone he was trying to give her. “How do I know that what you’re telling me is the truth?”

“Well, I suppose you don’t. I guess we’re going to have to start learning to trust each other again.”

She finally reached out and took the phone- an acknowledgement. She was going to have to trust him if she wanted to accomplish her goal. He nodded and then turned and walked away. She looked back at the memorial. A few heartbeats later, the phone rang. Claire took a deep breath and answered. Her work as a double agent was about to begin.
The first time Jamie Fraser met Claire Beauchamp, she was a bit of a disaster. He didn’t think he would ever forget her over-the-top red hair curling off in every direction and the blood on her mouth from her recent mission in Taiwan. He knew that she was tough (even more so after he read her statement) and he felt compassion for her but with an edge of wariness (sometimes they got walk-ins who were completely insane, after all). The second time Jamie Fraser met Claire Beauchamp, he lost his heart.

The day before her scheduled return to OB8, they arranged a meeting with her on campus in a truck disguised as a mobile blood donation unit to go over their operational plan for her work as a double agent. Claire walked through the door right on time for their meeting and when Jamie looked up the rest of the world vanished. The temporary clown hair was gone, replaced by a mixture of brown shades that almost defied description. It was chocolate and espresso and honey and it fell away from her face in the softest and most gorgeous curls he had ever seen. His fingers clenched to try to halt his overwhelming desire to find out if her curls were as soft to touch as he imagined. Her skin was like marble, pale and unblemished, but with a delightful flush to her cheeks from her recent walk across campus. She wore no makeup and didn’t need it. Her body made his mouth go dry and was all long lines and curves and lean muscles. But it was her eyes that pushed him over the edge. They were the color of the finest whiskey and he was instantly drunk on them alone. He nearly whimpered out loud and yet also wanted to drop to his knees and thank God and all His saints that this woman was now his asset. His to guard, his to protect. His responsibility. For now, only professionally. But one day, personally as well. Even such a minor detail as the prohibition of personal relationships between handlers and their assets was immaterial. His father Brian told him that he would know the right woman when she came along, and he was right. She was it for him. All he had to do now was find a way to focus on work when he was around her.

As if on cue, Jamie realized that Claire was saying his name to try to get his attention and had likely said it multiple times already. He dragged himself back to the task at hand as Claire was clearly anxious to get started. “Agent Fraser?”

“Please, call me Jamie,” he said with a rasp in his throat. He quickly took a drink from his water bottle as he still had no moisture in his mouth. “Have a seat and we’ll get started, aye?” He gestured to a chair and then took the one opposite hers.

“Good, because we have a lot to go over,” she replied. She looked over at the desk beside him, double-checking to see that he had note-taking materials at hand, and nodded. She took charge, dove in immediately and began describing her past missions that revealed to her the people and organizations connected to OB8 that they would need to target. She knew about Sandringham, the man who bankrolled their operations (“Randall relies on him,” she told Jamie). She knew about Yousef al-Ashar, working out of Egypt, who supplied all of OB8’s weapons (“If we want to take them out, we have to eliminate their supply of arms,” she said). She talked without stopping for quite some time, ignoring Jamie’s attempts to get a word in. “Ok, hold on a minute,” he finally managed to interject.

“What? You said you wanted to talk about the plan. I’m giving you the plan,” Claire said.

“It’s not your job to give me the plan, lass. I’ll be giving you the plan. Now tomorrow you’ll be back to work at OB8 and nothin’ should change,” he said, and went on to detail the protocol for her dead-dropping her mission parameters (detailed on a paper bag) and how they would contact her posing as a wrong number once they developed her counter mission. “Does that make sense so far?”
he asked.

“I’m sorry- can you show me what a paper bag looks like again?” she said impatiently. “Look, I understand that you have a job to do here, even though I think you’re a little bit young to be doing it (Jamie’s eyebrows went straight up into his hairline at that). But I am not here to learn the ins and outs of MI-6 procedure. I am here for one reason only and that is to take down OB8. All you have to do is listen to me and I will hand you, in record time, the targets that will help render OB8 useless.”

“Record time?” Jamie said, becoming increasingly annoyed. Claire may have been the woman of his dreams, but she was certainly a stubborn wee besom too. “Yes. Two months, at most, and then I am out. I don’t want anything to do with this spy business anymore- that’s the reason I came to MI-6 in the first place,” she told him.

“Draw me a map,” Jamie said, after a moment’s pause. “Draw me a map of OB8.” He pushed a pen and paper across to her.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding,” Claire said. “Do I look like I’m in primary school?”

“Just humor me, aye?” Jamie said, louder now. Her impatience was bringing his temper bubbling to the surface. “Show me what you think the OB8 family tree looks like- all the key players and how they’re connected.” She grabbed the pen, wrote for about thirty seconds, and then pushed the paper back towards him. Her map was simple, with no more than ten names. “There is only one way to do this, and that’s my way,” she said.

Jamie simply nodded, stood, and opened the cabinet behind him on the wall. He pulled out a large roll of paper resembling a set of blueprints. He turned back to the desk and rolled out the paper. Claire’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. “This is the map as we know it of OB8’s operations,” he said. The map was covered with people, all over the world, showing how they were connected to each other, which targets had already been eliminated and which were still active. It was as if a thousand spiders had all somehow linked their many legs together. “Since I’ve started, I’ve only seen this map grow. If this was only about eliminating the Inverness cell of OB8 we would have raided that office two years ago. It’s not about cutting off an arm of the monster, ye ken? It’s about killing the monster. The work that you’ve signed up for, that your Uncle Lamb is already doing? It’s complicated, it’s political, and it’s long-term.” She looked up at him and he could see her dawning understanding and the fear that shadowed her whiskey eyes. But then he saw the instant she swallowed that fear and replaced it with resolve, and he knew he was hopelessly lost. She was so brave, so strong, his brown-haired lass.

Mo neighan donn. “I need to get to class,” she said quietly as she stood. “Och, hold on,” he said and turned to open a drawer. He turned back to her and pushed up the sleeve of her sweater to place a band aid on the crease of her arm to complete the deception of what she’d been doing in the fake blood mobile. The instant his fingers touched her skin they both jolted slightly, and Claire pulled in a small but audible gasp. “Thank you,” she said breathlessly as their eyes met and held. He gave her a small smile and she returned it and then turned to leave. And God forgive him, Jamie didn’t even try to stop himself from staring at her lovely round arse until the door closed and she was out of sight.

Claire walked back into Credit Guépard the next day, rode the executive elevator, went through the scanning room, through the secret door, and back into OB8 as she had thousands of times before. She tried to act like nothing had changed, even though everything had changed. She knew that acting normally was vital to her success and survival, but she felt like everyone could see through her. Ned was the first person to approach her, stumbling over his words in his usual charming but
socially awkward techie way. Finally, after a few minutes, she interrupted him and said, “Ned, you can say anything to me.”

“I just wanted to say that I’m really sorry about your fiancé and I’m happy you’re back.” He smiled at her and she thanked him, turning away so he couldn’t see her pain and regret. Ned was such a good man, a kind man, and brilliant at his work. But he thought he was working for the good guys. She wished she could tell him the truth. Wished she could tell all of them. These interactions would be like hundreds of tiny daggers in her heart every single day and this was the first one and she already didn’t know how she would survive. But just like she had with Frank, she had to use that pain to keep driving her forward towards her goal. She took a deep breath, re-collected herself, and headed towards her mission briefing.

“We received word through back channels that some documents were stolen from Russia’s foreign intelligence office yesterday,” Randall began in their briefing. “We’ve also learned that a Sudanese man with links to a terrorist organization is traveling to Moscow as we speak to meet with these two men,” he said as he showed their pictures on the screen behind him. “So, they’re the ones who stole the documents?” Claire asked.

“We believe so. Claire, you and Joe are going to Moscow to intercept the documents. Joe will impersonate the buyer while Claire goes to the real buyer’s hotel room and steals the money. We need to know what’s in those documents and why a terrorist is willing to pay for them. Ned will go over your tech with you. That’s all. You leave first thing in the morning- the meet is tomorrow night.”

When they left the briefing room, Claire felt Randall approach her from behind. She turned and he asked her to come to his office for a minute. When she walked in, she saw her Uncle Lamb. Even knowing what she knew about him, she was still fairly stunned to see him there. “I will leave you two alone,” Randall said, and walked out, closing the door behind him.

“The room is clean. No one is listening, so we’re free to talk,” Lamb said.

“Why are you here?” Claire asked.

“I’m here to tell you what you already know. That I’m an agent with OB8. It would probably be a good idea for you to look surprised when you walk out of here.”

“But why now?” she said.

“Because it will facilitate what we’re trying to do,” he said simply.

Claire took a few steps toward him and then stopped. “Ever since you told me the truth, I’ve been asking myself questions, thousands of questions. But there’s one I need you to answer now. When Frank . . .” her voice caught on a sob before she could gather herself and continue, “was killed- did you know? Did you know in advance that that’s what they were going to do?” A few tears rolled down her cheeks as she looked at him, pleading silently that the answer she thought was coming would somehow not come.

“Yes, I knew,” he said quietly, and Claire gasped and slapped him across the cheek. Her tears flowed freely, and she made no attempt to stop them. “Don’t ever speak to me again,” she said, and turned and walked out of Randall’s office.

She went through her dead-drop protocol and then was contacted by the wrong number later that
day. She and Jamie arrived separately at a neighborhood convenience shop and stood back to back across the aisle from each other so no one would know they were there for a meet. Claire opened the refrigerator door as if she were looking for a soda. Jamie told her (or rather, told the loaf of bread he was looking at while talking to her) that the Sudanese terrorist was already on their watch list but that they didn’t know about the meet in Moscow.

“You’ll complete your mission as instructed,” he told her. “When you arrive at the airport make sure you’re the one holding the files, not Joe, aye? There’ll be two brush passes at the airport. We’ll get the files from you, make a copy, and then drop them back to you before you leave the airport.” He rounded the end of the aisle to get himself a soft serve cone. “Want one?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” she said with a glance up and a small smile. “Good luck,” he said to her quietly, and she nodded and left.

Claire entered the lobby of the hotel in Moscow wearing a blonde wig and a maid’s outfit under her coat. She reached up and touched the communicator in her ear and said, “You ready?”

Joe’s voice came back into her ear, “God, that was loud.”

“You told Ned you wanted your ear piece louder. I heard you say it.”

“Ok, well my headache and I are 10-17.” He was across the lobby, disguised as the Sudanese buyer. He crossed to the elevators and boarded, headed towards the meet with the sellers in the penthouse club. “Break a leg,” Claire said. She boarded another elevator and rode up to the 20th floor to head to the buyers’ room. On her way she grabbed a stack of towels from a housekeeping cart to complete her disguise. She knocked at the door and spoke to the guard who answered in fluent Russian. Once inside, she used the tranquilizer ring Ned gave her to knock him out. She found the briefcase containing the money for the buy and started to pick the lock. Time was short-Joe was already with the sellers as she continued to communicate with him through their ear pieces. And the real buyer was in the shower but wouldn’t be for long. Suddenly, another guard entered the room. It took her a few minutes to fight him off, but she managed to knock him out. She used the last dose of the tranquilizer ring on the buyer, who emerged from the bathroom just as the fight ended. Looking around at the destruction in the room, she realized they had a much bigger problem. “Joe, this wasn’t going to be a buy, this was going to be a robbery. There’s no money here.”

“Fantastic,” his voice came back to her, trying not to give away their new predicament to the sellers. “Don’t worry, Joe, I’m coming,” she said. She pulled off her maid’s outfit and revealed a skin-tight blue mini dress underneath. She quickly headed for the penthouse to rescue her partner.
Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire

Chapter Summary

Thanks for reading and commenting everyone! New chapters are posted every Tuesday!

Jamie sat at his desk, staring at nothing. He knew Claire was on her mission in Moscow and that single fact was the only thing he could hold in his mind. He wondered if it would ever get easier, sending her out into the field, knowing she was at risk not only from the mission itself but also from her betrayal of her employer. Jamie looked up and saw Ian standing in the doorway of his office and he gave him a weak smile. “Have you heard from her yet?” Ian asked.

“No,” Jamie said. “I’m no expectin’ to hear from her until she returns.”

Ian looked at his brother-in-law and shook his head. “You know she’s your asset, right? And you know we have rules about that?”

“Get out of my office, you wee fool,” Jamie huffed. Jamie wasn’t surprised that Ian had already guessed the truth of his feelings for Claire- they had known each other since they were children. But Jamie knew he was going to have to work very hard to hold his feelings away from other prying eyes in the office if he wanted to stay in his role as Claire’s handler.

Claire arrived in the club and spotted Joe and the two sellers at a table across the room. They had just handed Joe a manila envelope. “Joe, I’m here. Are those the files? If they are, cough.” He did. “Flash drive?” He coughed again. “Just one, or more?” She looked over and saw him hold up one finger against his cheek. “Ok, I’m heading your way. Get ready.” Claire pulled out a blank flash drive from her bra and grabbed a drink from a passing waiter as she circled the room. Joe had pulled the flash drive out from the envelope by the time she reached his table. She purposely fell forward and spilled her drink in the lap of one of the sellers, who jumped up, cursing her. As she was frantically apologizing in Russian, she and Joe pulled off the switch of the flash drives. Claire muttered her last apology and walked away. Once she had put some distance between them, Claire looked back. Joe had gotten up from the table, allegedly to go retrieve the money, but the sellers’ suspicions were up. One of them pulled a gun on Joe and Claire rushed back into the fray. She and Joe had worked together for so long that they could anticipate each other’s moves in fights. They quickly knocked out the two men and got out of the hotel with the flash drive to catch their flight home.

Back at the airport in Inverness, Claire was on alert as soon as she got off the plane. She sent Jamie a text from her MI-6 cell phone before leaving Moscow to let him know they got the files. Walking next to Joe, she saw Jamie walking toward her in the terminal, disguised as a janitor (she nearly giggled to break the tension as he had to be the largest janitor she had ever seen). He was carrying a caddy full of cleaning supplies, which was where Claire dropped the flash drive as she passed him. Once he passed her, he quickly ducked into a room marked as a janitor’s closet. Behind the door was an MI-6 office. Jamie peeled off the janitor’s uniform he had on over his suit and passed the flash drive off to one of their tech guys, who started to quickly copy its contents. Jamie was
practically bouncing with impatience as Claire continued to make her way through the airport. The car OB8 had sent to pick up her and Joe would be waiting for them. “They’re almost outside, man. You need to hurry,” Jamie snarled. The second the flash drive was back in his hand Jamie was out of the office like a shot. He saw her on the curb- she and Joe were assisting the driver loading their bags into the car. She looked up and their eyes met for just a split second. Claire held out her handbag as Jamie approached and at the last possible moment, he dropped the flash drive back into her bag and kept walking. She was in the car and gone mere moments later.

Claire opened the door of the new place she and Geillis moved into together after Frank’s death. Her old place held too many memories and Geillis didn’t want Claire to be alone as she grieved. Now, Claire was thankful Geillis wasn’t home so she wouldn’t have to explain the riot of her emotions at what she had just done. She left her bags by the door and nearly sprinted down the hall to her bedroom, where she dug in her dresser, pulled out the box with her engagement ring in it and placed it back on her finger. She took deep breaths, trying to calm herself, reminding herself of why she’d embarked on this path. She decided a bath and a glass of wine were in order too. She couldn’t believe she did it. She had committed her first act of counter-espionage against OB8. In doing so, she lied to her partner and one of her best friends in the world. She had also come within seconds of being caught. As she soaked in the bathtub and twirled her ring on her finger, her thoughts drifted to Jamie. She couldn’t deny that he intrigued her. She couldn’t deny that when she walked into the blood mobile, the sheer physical presence of him nearly sucked all the air out of her lungs. She couldn’t deny how good his body looked in his work suits. She couldn’t deny that she’d never seen eyes as blue as his or that she wondered what his red curls would feel like if she twined her fingers in them. And most disturbing of all, she couldn’t deny the jolt of electricity that shot through her system when his hand touched her arm. It had been a long while since she’d wanted anyone that way. She shook her head and tried to bury it, keep it professional. He was her handler, she was his asset. And yet, she wondered if she would ever be able to think of her handler without wondering what it would be like to be “handled” by him in a completely non-professional way.

Claire sat in Randall’s office the next day at work. He told her the files she’d recovered were encrypted but that they’d managed to pull some preliminary information out of them. “During the height of the Cold War, the Russians successfully smuggled six nuclear weapons into the United States and buried them in various locations around the country. When the Cold War ended, that information was disclosed to the U.S. government and the bombs were quickly recovered. The data we’ve recovered from the files so far indicates that there was a seventh weapon. Other than that, we only have a name, Yuri Ivanov, and an address in Virginia,” Randall said.

“You think he’s babysitting the weapon,” Claire concluded.

“We do. You’re going to Virginia. I want you to go to the address and find out as much about Ivanov as you can- where he works, what his hobbies are, what kind of coffee he drinks. We need to find out where that weapon is hidden. CIA already knows you’re coming. Your plane leaves in two hours.”


Jamie’s godfather Murtaugh, who also happened to be his immediate supervisor, was having a heated conversation with his godson in Jamie’s office later that day. “There is no way we can sit on
this information, lad, and you know it as well as I do. We have to tell the Americans that there is a stray nuclear bomb in their midst and do everything we can to assist them in finding it and rendering it safe,” Murtaugh was saying.

“I agree that we have to tell them, but we need to give Claire time to do her job. If either us or the Americans go charging in there her cover will be blown and we will have lost a valuable asset inside OB8. Have you read her file? She’s doing our work for us,” Jamie countered back. “Read her file, sir. And you will see as I have that we can’t afford to lose her as a double agent.”

“I’ve read her file,” Murtaugh sighed, full of frustration. “What do you want from me, lad?”

“Just give her five hours once she lands. Let her try to find the weapon without interference before you call in the cavalry, aye?”

“Alright lad. Five hours. Not a single minute more,” Murtaugh agreed. Jamie tried, unsuccessfully, to hide his sigh of relief. Ian had arrived in Jamie’s office doorway during this exchange and as Murtaugh walked out, Ian walked in. ‘I’m impressed,” Ian said. “You’ve got some bollocks of steel there, Fraser.” Jamie rolled his eyes at Ian but also couldn’t help but smile. Their co-worker Rupert walked by Jamie’s door and Ian called out, “Eh, Rupert, have you met my friend here, Bollocks of Steel?”

“Don’t you ever work, Ian Murray?” Jamie taunted. He prayed his gamble on Claire’s behalf was a good one- otherwise not even having steel bollocks would be able to save him from the consequences.

Claire drove her rental car to the address in Virginia and her first thought was that the address must be wrong. But she pulled off the road and parked nonetheless- might as well get out and look around while she was here, although she was certainly not expecting to find Ivanov in a cemetery. She wandered among the headstones for a few minutes until something caught her eye. Amongst the green in the cemetery, there was a patch of dead, brown grass. When she came around the stone at the head of it, she saw the name she was looking for- Ivanov. Well, nothing for it. Claire found a maintenance shed, broke open the very flimsy lock, and pulled out a shovel. She removed her suit jacket and started digging. Thankfully it wasn’t too hot outside, but Claire had still worked up a sweat by the time she finally pushed her shovel into the earth and hit something solid. Some more time passed until she was pushing a thin layer of remaining dirt away with her hands (she was already filthy anyway- the cleaners were going to have a fit over her suit pants) and uncovering the lid of the coffin. She reached for the side, pulled the lid open, and saw it. The bomb. She took a deep breath in relief. In the next moment, the breath clogged in her lungs as the timer on the bomb suddenly came to life. Unless she did something fast, she had two minutes to live.
Claire was screaming into her cell phone at Ned. In retrospect, the extra volume probably didn’t help, but in the moment, there was no other way to register the panic she was feeling. She had removed the ignition panel and was looking at a mass of wires like a giant plate of deadly spaghetti. As the timer continued to tick down, she shouted, “I see a red wire, a yellow, a green, a blue, a white, a black, a blue-white, a red-white . . .”

“Ok,” Ned said as he turned over schematics in his office at OB8. After a moment’s hesitation, he said, “Cut the blue . . .”

“Ok, cutting the blue wire,” Claire said, her wire clippers poised over the wire.

“No WAIT!” Ned shouted.

“What? Don’t do that again, Ned!” Claire was rapidly running out of time- only 30 seconds to go.

“Do you see one ignition panel or two?” Ned asked her. “One, I only see one,” Claire said.

“Ok . . .” Ned said, turning over the schematics again. “Ok, you need to cut the blue-white wire, Claire.”

“Are you sure?” Claire said. This would be her only chance. 10 seconds. “I’m sure,” Ned said. She took a quick breath and closed her wire cutters over the blue-white wire. The timer stopped at 2 seconds.

Claire took the biggest exhale of her life and held the phone away from her for a moment so she could collect herself. From the other end, she heard Ned say, “Hello?”

After her return to Scotland, Claire was back in the blood mobile on campus and Jamie was furious.

“Ye called OB8 instead of MI-6? That is unacceptable, Claire! We have nuclear weapons specialists on staff . . .”

Claire took a moment to register how much thicker his accent became when his emotions were up.

“Well, none of them are Ned Gowan. And what was I supposed to do? I had TWO MINUTES,” Claire reminded him.

“Ye were supposed to follow procedure and not let a nuclear weapon go walking right into OB8’s hands, aye?” Jamie was shaking in anger, but Claire couldn’t have guessed the real cause. Yes, he was upset that she’d called OB8. Yes, he was upset that they now had the weapon. But above all, his anger was born of fear, a bone-deep, mind-numbing fear that had frozen his entire body and soul for a time after he’d heard what happened in Virginia. He’d just found Claire and he had come that
close to losing her. He wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled and kiss her senseless at the same
time. Since he could do neither, he closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm himself. As
if sensing just how close he was to losing control, Claire spoke quietly when she resumed. “Yes,
OB8 now has a nuclear weapon. And yes, that is technically my fault. But, we will track it and steal
it back from them.”

“It’s in Cairo,” Jamie said solemnly. “After you called Ned, when OB8 arrived in Virginia to pick
up our nuke, they turned around and sold it to Yousef al-Ashar.”

Claire couldn’t stay standing, so she sank down in the nearest chair. Yousef al-Ashar, international
arms dealer, was now in possession of a nuclear weapon. Because of her. There was nothing for it.
Intentional or not, she had to make amends and right the wrong she had done. “I can go. I can go
and disarm the weapon. I told you I’ve been to al-Ashar’s headquarters. I can break in and steal the
core.”

“No,” Jamie said immediately. “It’s too dangerous. Al-Ashar knows who you work for, Claire. If
anyone sees you, it could get back to Randall and you would be exposed as a double agent.”

“Then I’ll just have to make sure no one sees me,” Claire said.

As Claire was driving home to get ready for her trip to Egypt, she got a phone call from Geillis.
“Claire, have ye heard anything from the Inverness Police recently? About Frank?”

Claire swung her car to the side of the road and stopped. “No, not for a while. What happened?”

“I just saw a report on the news about his case- did ye know that on the night he was killed, Frank
was booked on a flight to Singapore?”

Claire could barely speak as tears instantly welled up and grief threatened to close her throat. “Yes,”
she said quietly. “Yes, I knew. He was going to go speak at a conference. I was going to meet him
there so we could spend a week in Bali afterwards.”

“I’m sorry, Claire,” Geillis said. She could hear how upset Claire was and hated to think she had
caused her friend any more pain. “I just thought ye’d want to know that they’re still investigating
what happened to him.”

“It’s alright, Geillis. It’s not your fault. It’s just that every day I’m trying not to close my eyes and
see him the way I found him, you know?”

“I feel terrible,” Geillis said. “Don’t,” Claire said. “Look, I will talk to you later, alright?” After
they said their goodbyes, Claire called her uncle and asked him to meet her.

Claire hadn’t been back to Culloden since the last time she was there with Frank. She hardly knew
where to begin when her uncle pulled up and got out of his car, especially considering what had
happened the last time they’d seen each other in Randall’s office. Fortunately, he started for her.

“I heard you’re going to Egypt. Munro told me,” Uncle Lamb said.

“Yes. I need you to cover for me with Randall while I’m gone. He obviously can’t know what I’m
doing.”
“I will take care of it,” Lamb assured her. They stood in silence for a moment before Claire gathered her courage. “It was you, wasn’t it? You were the one who booked the flight for Frank. The night he was killed.”

“Yes,” Lamb said gently. “You were in Taiwan. I was going to get you a ticket from Taiwan to Singapore and from there the two of you could have gone anywhere. I went to his flat, but I got there too late. Just minutes too late.” Claire lowered her head and was silently weeping. “I’m sorry I slapped you,” she said when she composed herself. “Thank you for what you did.” More silence, but this time it was filled with compassion, tenderness, gratitude, and love instead of anger and misunderstanding. “I have to go,” she said. He nodded, his face unreadable as she turned to leave. He then headed to Randall’s office to give Claire a cover story for her time in Egypt.

Claire had already left on her mission to recover the nuclear weapon’s core when Murtaugh stopped by Jamie’s office. Jamie had been bracing himself ever since Virginia for the reprimand he was sure to receive. He was the one who had convinced Murtaugh to let Claire go after the bomb by herself and now it was in the hands of a criminal. Even knowing what was coming, he tried to head it off. “Sir, let me just say . . .”

“Na, dinna fash, lad. What happened in Virginia was my call. But apparently, you were right. Munro looked at her file and decided Claire Beauchamp is an important asset to this agency and we can’t afford to lose her services sae soon. So, after she returns from Egypt, you’ll be pulled from her case.”

“What?” Jamie was stunned. He wouldn’t get to work with Claire anymore. He might never see her again. He felt like he’d been punched in the stomach. He couldn’t manage any words, so Murtaugh continued, “Aye, Munro wants a more senior officer on the case. He wants you to put together a briefing for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Conference coming up in Paris- which, under the circumstances, is pretty ironic, aye?” Murtaugh narrowed his eyes at Jamie and knew something was amiss, something more than just wounded pride over being pulled from an assignment. Jamie simply circled his desk and sank back down in his chair. After waiting a few beats, Murtaugh shook his head, turned, and left the office. His godson was as stubborn as a pile of rocks. Jamie would enlighten him when he was ready and no sooner.

Claire had an excellent memory and knew exactly how to penetrate al-Ashar’s headquarters. Dressed in all black, her head and face were covered to conceal her identity. And for the first time on a mission, Jamie’s voice was the one she heard through her ear piece. “I just took out the guard. I’m on my way to find the weapon,” she told him. “Copy that,” his voice came back to her. Hearing him in her ear made her calm in a way she couldn’t explain. Even though she was so used to hearing Joe on coms, it was as if she and Jamie knew instinctively how to work together. She moved through the building quickly but carefully and came to the storage room she remembered from her previous visits. On a table across the room, she saw a wooden crate that looked promising. “I think I might have found it, stand by,” Claire said. “Copy that,” Jamie said again. She ran to the crate and pried off the lid. Sure enough, it was the bomb she’d disarmed in Virginia. “I’ve got it. I’m going for the core.”

“Copy. Radio silence until you’ve retrieved the core.”

Claire couldn’t help it. She smirked under her mask even as she was removing the panel that would reveal the nuclear core. “I know you’re into procedure, Agent Fraser. But do you really have to be so robotic?”
“Radio silence requested,” he clarified, but she could hear the answering smile in his voice. “Alright, robotic it is then,” Claire replied. Back to the task at hand, she carefully pulled the spherical core out of the weapon. “I’m holding the core,” she said. She realized a moment later when she heard a distinctive clicking sound near her right ear that she also had a loaded gun pointed at her head- and it was held by Yousef al-Ashar himself.
Friends and Enemies

Chapter Summary

So I realized that all the chapter titles were starting to take the same form. And because I'm very type A, that means I had to go back and fix the one that wasn't the same as the others :). Let me know what you think of this chapter- we're heading into some interesting new territory!

Quietly. Ever so quietly, as if the core was a sleeping baby that would be disturbed from slumber by her raising her voice, Claire whispered to al-Ashar, “I’m holding enough plutonium to liquify our insides in 48 hours.”

Nearly as quietly, al-Ashar replied, “Put it down.” Claire knew that wasn’t an option. “If I put it down, you’ll kill me.” So, Claire did the only thing she could think of- she threw the core straight up in the air. This bought her a few precious seconds and provided a much-needed distraction as al-Ashar looked up briefly and relaxed the gun. Claire quickly disarmed him and knocked him out, catching the core as it fell back to Earth. She took off running but knew her work was not over. Sure enough, she encountered al-Ashar’s security forces while making her way out of the building and she had to take cover behind a stack of crates amid a hail of gun fire. She shouted into her com, “I have the core and I’m ready for extraction!” Jamie shouted back, “We’ll be there in two minutes!” Claire, who was both outnumbered and outgunned, exclaimed, “I may not have two minutes!” Claire looked around and decided to risk making a break for the stairs while the security forces took a brief moment to reload. She ducked her head and ran. When she was a few feet past the top of the stairs, her bag struck her hip and the core popped out and rolled back towards the top step. She dove for it and grabbed it back just as it was about to start a journey that would have surely killed them all. Claire breathed a brief sigh of relief. As her pursuers reached the bottom of the stairs, Claire grabbed a grenade from her bag, pulled the pin, and threw it to the bottom of the stairs. As it exploded, she ran out of the building and met the waiting MI-6 helicopter, handing the core off to the munitions expert who carefully placed it into a padded case.

Claire was in the briefing room at OB8 the next day with Joe, Ned, and Randall. Randall told them that the battery she recovered from Taiwan was still in analysis. However, the scientist who built the device was not the inventor- he was simply working from someone else’s plans.

Randall told them, “The battery was built from a sketch created by an 18th century man known only as Master Raymond. He was a noted healer in Paris during the reign of Louis XV but was eventually executed on suspicions of heresy and occult practices. After his death Raymond’s apothecary shop was dismantled, all his writings and drawings were stolen or sold, scattered all over the world. Some believe him to be a prophet. The truth, however, might be even more spectacular.” He handed Claire a report. “Look at that. It’s an analysis of one of Master Raymond’s documents found in Brazil last year.” Claire’s eyes widened and she read the title out loud. “Nuclear Energy and An End to War.”

“Master Raymond was writing about Hiroshima and Nagasaki two hundred years in advance- and including details that that only someone who was alive during World War II would have known,”
Randall said. Joe looked incredulous. “Are you suggesting Master Raymond could travel through time?”

“We don’t know,” Randall replied. “But finding out more about his work and keeping it out of the wrong hands has become a priority for the agency. Right now, we are interested in a code written on the back of two of Raymond’s sketches. We already have one. The other is in the possession of this man, Rafael Salazar,” Randall said as he showed them a picture. “We attempted to contact him about purchasing the sketch but not long after he abruptly backed out and said the sketch was no longer for sale. Someone likely tipped him off to the sketch’s true value. He stores it in his vault on the 30th floor of a building in Barcelona, but he always keeps the key to the case on his body. We just found out the key was somehow stolen. We think it was S Board.”

“Malva,” Claire said. “It was Malva, wasn’t it?” Malva worked for S Board, a criminal organization with ties to the Russian mafia. Claire knew what that meant—Malva would be after the sketch, too.

After detailing her upcoming mission and dead-dropping it to MI-6, Claire went for a run to meet Jamie in a nearby park. She stopped when she saw him stretching at a bench and went to the other end of the bench to do the same. Each of them was pretending not to notice how the other looked in their running clothes. “MI-6 wants you to follow through on the mission in Barcelona as planned,” Jamie said. “We already knew about the sketch—we’re after it, too.”

“Really?” Claire said, surprised. “MI-6 actually thinks time travel might be a possibility?”

“They can’t afford to dismiss it outright. It’s too dangerous, ye ken?”

Claire nodded. “Alright. Tell the MI-6 office in Barcelona to prepare for a dead drop.” Jamie paused for a moment as he switched to stretching his other leg. “What can you tell me about this S Board operative, Malva Christie?”

Claire took a deep breath. “She’s not Russian but she spent some time there growing up. Her father was a missionary, ironically. She is one of their top agents and specializes in wet work and active measures. Last year I had a meeting with an informant in Sarajevo. He wasn’t anyone important—just a low-level guy who needed the money. Malva recorded our entire conversation using a parabolic microphone from a building across the street.”

“How do you know that?” Jamie asked. “Because as we stood up to leave, Malva blew out the back of his skull with a sniper rifle, even though she already had the information she needed. Her way of letting me know she thought I was out of my league,” Claire said.

Jamie couldn’t help the clench in his gut. He didn’t want Claire anywhere near this woman, but knew it was likely their paths would cross on this mission. Quietly, he said to her, “Be careful out there.” Claire nodded and said, “I’ll see you when I get back.”

Now Jamie felt like he was about to double over. He still couldn’t quite believe what he had to tell her. “Actually, ye won’t. I’m being replaced. According to Munro, I’m not experienced enough to be yer handler.” He knew his accent had thickened, and he felt himself choking on the words and had to take a moment to gather himself. He could see some of the same emotion in Claire’s face when she glanced up and it gave him an odd sense of comfort. “It was very nice to meet ye, Claire. Good luck in Barcelona.” By the time Claire managed to raise her head again, he was already running back through the park. He was gone.
Jamie had run straight to the gym at the office- he felt a desperate need to spend some quality time with a punching bag. Showered and back in his office, he was pacing back and forth while Ian sat in the chair behind his desk. The punching bag had helped, but not nearly enough. “Munro picked McLennan to replace me as Claire’s handler. McLennan? The man is a fool,” Jamie fumed. Ian tried to reason with his brother-in-law. “They needed a senior officer . . .” Jamie ran right over that line of logic, spitting back, “He may be senior but he’s junior in the head, aye?” Ian took a breath and knew he was poking at a hornet’s nest, but felt he had no choice. “We’ve known each other a long time, Jamie. You were my friend long before you were my partner here. And now you’re my family, too. So, I’m going to tell you the truth even when you don’t want to hear it. I think you’re way too emotionally involved here.”

Jamie rolled his eyes and paced back toward the door. “That’s ridiculous. Is that your answer for everything now?” Jamie knew he wasn’t convincing Ian, but still felt he had to try. He felt like his heart had been ripped out and he was trying to keep everyone from seeing just how badly he was bleeding. “McLennan is an idiot and we both ken it, Ian.”

“I don’t think it would matter if Munro had picked the Almighty himself to be Claire’s handler. You would still be just as jealous as you clearly are of McLennan. He gets to see Claire every week now and you don’t and it’s driving you mad.”

“This isn’t about me!” Jamie shouted, and suddenly all the fight left him, and he sank down in a chair next to his office door. “Claire told me a bit about this S Board woman, this Malva Christie. She couldn’t sound more dangerous. And I’m worried. I ken I’m off the case. But I want her to come back.” He ran his hands through his hair, a gesture of utter frustration and helplessness.

“There’s nothing you can do, man,” Ian said sympathetically. “Besides, how do ye ken this Malva Christie will even be there? Don’t worry.” Jamie tried to follow Ian’s advice, but worrying about Claire was already such a natural part of his being that he couldn’t remember a time without it. He thought the feeling was likely to be reinforced by his next task- he had to meet with Claire’s new handler to review her file.

McLennan flipped through Claire’s file while Jamie sat impatiently tapping his fingers on his leg. “You sure wrote a lot about this Beauchamp girl, aye?” McLennan said as he continued to page through the file. “Is there anything else you want to tell me about her?”

“I think you’ll find Claire is quite capable of speaking for herself,” Jamie said in clipped tones. McLennan turned back over to the first page of the file, where Jamie could see Claire’s picture clipped to the paper. “Look at her,” McLennan said, in a tone that did not escape Jamie’s notice. “I wouldn’t kick her out of bed, aye?”

Red. He saw nothing but red. Jamie’s head snapped up so fast he was surprised it didn’t fly off his neck. He shot McLennan a look of pure rage and venom and dug his fingers into his legs so hard he was sure he would have bruises later. It was the only way he could stop himself from taking those fingers and wrapping them around the man’s neck. McLennan raised his eyebrows but said nothing, dropping the file back in front of Jamie and walking out of the room. Jamie knew he was going to have to pay the gym another visit before heading home for the day- he had a whole new avalanche of punishment to unleash on the punching bag.

Before they left for Barcelona, Ned gave Claire a microphone necklace to wear to the party they were attending in Salazar’s building, along with a sonic wave meter disguised as a Spanish peseta.
She would activate it to create a distraction in the party with a simple pen trigger Ned created for her. Claire arrived at the party in an orange-red dress and ginger wig. Joe would be backing her up from outside in the van on this mission, helping with the surveillance and security systems. Claire placed the peseta near the window as she moved smoothly through the party crowd. As she turned, she caught sight of a curtain of long dark hair belonging to a woman in a catering uniform. “Joe, Malva’s here,” Claire said softly. “Alright, stay on your toes, LJ,” Joe replied. “You ready?” he asked. “As I’ll ever be,” Claire said. She pulled the pen trigger out of her handbag and clicked it. The sonic wave meter shattered the nearby glass and the party guests began to scatter in panic. Malva was already on the move as Claire headed downstairs. Before going after the sketch, she had to place a remote modem in the electrical room so Joe could override the building’s security system. Joe directed her to the specific panel they needed, but when she arrived, she bit off, “Bloody hell. Malva’s already been here.”

“That means she’s got backup nearby, too. Go ahead and place the modem, Claire. We can piggyback off her signal,” Joe said. “Can you see her on any of the security cameras?” Claire asked. Joe glanced at the monitors surrounding him in the back of the van and said, “No, I don’t see her anywhere.” Just then, Claire heard a rumbling overhead and looked up. “Joe, she’s in the ducts.” Claire took off running from the electrical room towards the elevator. “Joe have you finished looping the feed?” she shouted as she ran. “Looping feed . . . now,” Joe said.

Claire got off the elevator on the 30th floor. The vault was directly in front of her and all the barriers were plexiglass so she could see the case with the sketch in it from where she stood. She pulled out Ned’s descrambler and told Joe she was working on the vault door code. Suddenly, on the other side of the door, Claire saw a section of the floor being cut away. It was Malva. She came up from the duct system through the floor and made her way to the case containing the sketch. Claire saw her say something into the watch on her wrist and then walk back towards the hole in the floor. She looked through the door at Claire and gave her a mocking kiss goodbye, leaving the imprint of her lipstick on the plexiglass. Just before she went through the floor, Malva pulled the alarm. Claire looked back and realized that the descrambler had stopped working. Security was coming and she was trapped. “Joe, someone is jamming the descrambler! Hurry!” Joe climbed into the driver’s seat of the van and buckled his seat belt. “Hang on, LJ. Let me try to find them.” Claire was bouncing in her impatience, but she had nowhere to go and Malva was getting farther away with each passing moment. “Joe, what’s happening?” Claire asked.

“I think I found them. Stand by.” Moments later, Claire heard crunching metal and breaking glass as Joe slammed into S Board’s surveillance van. The descrambler unlocked the vault door and Claire dove through the hole in the floor just as security got off the elevator. She had to try to head Malva off before she got out of the building. Back in the basement, Claire came out onto a landing and saw Malva running below her. She grabbed a section of chain and swung down from the landing, her feet connecting with the center of Malva’s chest. The bag with the sketch case went flying as she and Malva engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Malva was good—very good. Each would gain the advantage for a moment before the other would snatch it back. Finally, Malva kicked Claire and Claire fell backwards down a short flight of stairs. Breathless, Claire said, “Joe, she’s heading out the back.” Claire managed to pull herself to her feet and headed for the back door. Once outside, she met Joe. Malva hadn’t gone past him. He looked up and spotted her climbing a fire escape ladder on a neighboring building. “Joe, give me your gun!” Claire shouted. He handed her his pistol, Claire took a moment to gather herself and aim, then fired. The bullet struck the bag Malva was holding and it fell to the ground below. She nodded back at Claire in acknowledgement and continued climbing. They were even for today.
Allies and Adversaries

Chapter Summary

I appreciate your feedback on the last chapter SO MUCH! THANK YOU! We definitely haven't seen the last of Malva nor heard the last of Master Raymond. And of course, there's also that pesky matter of Claire's new handler . . .

After her return from Barcelona, Claire found herself in the back of a truck in an alley in Inverness, sitting across from her new handler. “You’re going to like working with me, lass,” McLennan told her as he flipped through her file. Claire didn’t think this statement merited a response, so she gave none, waiting for him to get to the point of the meeting. “I ken you’ve been through a lot, especially since Fred was killed, but I want you to know I understand. I empathize.”

“His name was Frank,” Claire said shortly. McLennan looked down at the file as if he could somehow blame it for his mistake. “Aye. What happened to Frank was a tragedy.”

“Mr. McLennan, is there a reason you called me here?” Claire asked. “I just wanted to get some face time with my girl, answer any queries you may have,” McLennan smiled at her. “I have a query,” Claire said. McLennan looked pleased at this and said, “Aye? Ask away, lass.”

“Are you insane?” Claire spat at him. “OB8 has an entire division whose sole purpose is to track the movements of their agents and report suspect activity. YOUR GIRL is risking her life, and you yours, every time we lay eyes on each other. So, do me a favor. Don’t be so friendly.”

“I just love your spirit, lass,” McLennan said with a chuckle. Claire’s patience was utterly at an end. He truly thought this was a joke. “Are we done here?” She hardly waited for his answer before she got up and went out the back door of the truck into the night.

Claire, Ned, and Randall were walking through the halls of OB8 the next day. “Ned hasn’t been able to open the case containing the sketch,” Randall told Claire. “In my defense, sir, the case is equipped with a next-generation failsafe system. The case cannot be opened without the key. And any attempt to bypass the lock will destroy the contents of the case,” Ned said in an almost pleading tone of voice, clearly terrified that he was about to get fired. “Get back to work, Ned,” Randall said impatiently. “Just to clarify, I’m not being fired, correct?” Ned said. “Back to work means not fired,” Randall replied. Turning back to Claire, he said, “I brought in one of our best strategists to help us plan our next move.” As they entered the briefing room, a chair spun around toward the door. It was Uncle Lamb. It still jolted Claire’s system every time she saw him in this setting, every time she was confronted with the reality that her uncle was a spy. Randall walked around to the other side of the table as Claire took a seat next to her uncle. “We initially put together a mission plan for you to infiltrate S Board headquarters to retrieve the key to the case, but Lamb convinced us to change course,” Randall said. “Why?” Claire asked. “It seems like the right move.”

“It’s too risky,” Lamb said. “45 minutes ago, I contacted S Board and set up a meeting with them. Malva will bring the key and you will bring the case to a neutral location. The meeting will be covered by both agencies’ security forces. You will open the case together and then go your separate ways.”
Claire was incredulous. “You expect me to just give the information to Malva?”

“S Board doesn’t know the code is divided into two sketches. Since we have the other sketch, we have nothing to lose by showing them what’s in the case,” Randall explained. “This is the most stable strategic scenario we can get,” Lamb continued. “It allows both parties to take a mutually beneficial course of action, which minimizes the risk to everyone involved.”

“Assuming all the parties are rational,” Claire countered. “I understand your concern, Claire, but the meeting is on. Hamburg Stadium, 48 hours from now,” Randall said.

Claire reached over and grabbed a magazine that had just been placed on the newsstand in front of her. McLennan stood to her right, pretending to be looking over that day’s edition of The London Times. When Claire opened, the magazine, she saw a plastic bag. “What’s this?” she asked quietly.

“It’s a two-way earpiece, so you can talk to us without OB8 hearing. There’s also a wireless tracker. We want you to tag Malva during the meeting so we can follow her movements, find out more about what S Board is up to,” McLennan said. “Wait a minute. Whose idea was this?” Claire asked. “This is my operation,” McLennan replied defensively.

“The only way this is going to work is if everyone is on their best behavior,” Claire said. “I’m not going to be the one to break that, especially considering that I will have half a dozen sniper rifles pointed at me ready to fire if I even look the wrong way.”

“Who in God’s name do you think you are?” McLennan was getting angry. So was Claire. “I worked for OB8 for seven years before I found out who they really are. My days of blindly following orders are over. I will not tag Malva at the meeting. And tell Munro that if Jamie Fraser is not on the other end of this ear piece when I turn it on, MI-6 gets nothing.”

“He’s a junior officer,” McLennan sputtered. He was red all over and Claire envisioned steam coming out of his ears. “Then promote him,” she said simply. She turned and left him staring at the newspaper.

In Hamburg, Claire was riding in the back of a van driven by Joe getting outfitted by one of their field tech officers. She could hear in her ear that the security team briefing had already started at the stadium. They had agreed to divide the stadium down the middle- OB8 would be on the west side, S Board on the east side. Each agency would have snipers on their side of the stadium, and both had orders only to fire if their asset was fired upon. The van pulled into the parking lot and Claire grabbed the case and nodded at Joe. The tech officer slid the van door open and Claire got out and walked into the stadium. Inside, she changed out her ear piece with the two-way communicator from MI-6. Claire started walking down the steps and touched her ear piece to switch it to the MI-6 com channel. “To whom am I speaking?” she asked. “Your invisible friend,” Jamie replied. Claire was utterly helpless to prevent the magnificent smile that spread across her face and the sigh of relief that escaped her lips when she heard his voice. “I’m at a satellite relay station back in Inverness watching you from a 200-mile Earth orbit.” She looked up at the night sky and smiled wider. “My guardian angel,” she said. “I was going to say the same to you, lass.” His voice lowered and he said, “Thanks for the promotion.”

“You’re welcome,” she told him, still grinning like a fool. As nervous as this meeting made her, she was much calmer knowing that Jamie had her back. She looked up as a car pulled into the lower part of the stadium. She clicked her ear piece back over to Joe’s voice and said, “She’s on her
way.” Claire made her way to the middle of the stadium and waited for Malva to meet her there from the other end. She looked up and saw the snipers who had her in their sights. When Malva was about 10 feet away, she stopped. “How’s your Russian these days?” she asked Claire. Claire answered her in perfect Russian, switching to Spanish towards the end, as she knew Malva was also fluent in that language. Malva didn’t miss a beat and answered back in Spanish. In English, however, she said, “I heard about your fiancé. I wondered if it was possibly a hit by your security section, a retaliation for something. Maybe you said something in your sleep you shouldn’t have. But then I thought, why would you be here, back in the service of the employer who killed your true love?” Everyone froze. The atmosphere was full of a crackling tension. Claire held her composure and didn’t let anything show on her face. “I assume you brought the key,” she said simply. “I assume you brought the box,” Malva replied. They walked forward together, and Claire put the case on the ground. Malva removed the key from her jacket pocket and inserted it into the slot in the front of the box. Claire then unfastened the latches and opened the lid. Both of their eyes widened into saucers and Claire mumbled, “Oh my God.”
There was a vial on either side of the code in the box. As soon as they opened the lid, the vials started to fill with a substance that looked like acid. They had only a few seconds before the acid would release and begin to obliterate the code. Claire and Malva both started committing the series of zeroes and ones to memory, racing against time and each other. It took almost no time at all for the code to disappear. They stood and faced each other again. “Did you get it?” Claire asked. “Did you?” Malva responded. Then they both turned and ran for their respective sides of the stadium. As Claire ran, she switched over to her MI-6 com and started shouting the code to Jamie. “I’m going to give OB8 the wrong code,” she panted as she ran. “No, ye can’t do that, ye have to give them the correct code,” Jamie told her urgently. “I am not giving them the right number! Absolutely out of the question!” Claire shouted as she ran through the tunnel toward the stadium exit. “Listen to me, Claire, this is critical, ye give them the number! That’s an order!” Jamie said. “An order?” Claire said, incredulous. “Ye heard me,” Jamie said. “We need to have a long talk when I get back to Inverness,” Claire said, still running. Then she shut off her MI-6 com as she reached the van. She told Dixon the code as they drove off— at one point she purposely gave him three ones in a row instead of two, but she corrected herself. On the other side of the stadium, in another van, Malva was giving the code to S Branch. Claire slumped against the side of the van and finally allowed herself to breathe, deep breaths after her hard run and the stress of the meeting. “You did good, LJ,” Joe said as he laid a hand on her shoulder.

Back in Inverness, Claire and Jamie were yelling at each other in an MI-6 truck parked in an alley while Ian vainly attempted to do work in the same space. They were talking over each other, neither letting the other finish a thought.

“You do not give me orders . . . ”

“Well, maybe I do, then . . . ”

“I could easily have misled OB8 . . . ”

“Ye’re not thinking this through . . . ”

“I thought misleading them was why I’m here . . . ”

“Just stop talking for a second, aye?” Jamie finally said, forcefully enough that there was a brief and sudden moment of silence between them. “If ye gave OB8 a bogus code what would have happened when Malva gave S Branch the correct code?”

“They would have thought I made a mistake!” Claire shouted back.

“Oh, and that Malva didn’t?” Jamie said, temper still up. “She would have given them the correct
code. They would have seen the code indicated Athens, S Branch would have gone there, OB8 would have had nothing. They would suspect you.” Claire ducked her head, still frustrated, but Jamie’s words were penetrating. “Claire, we have to be verra careful, ye ken? We have to be wildly, crazy careful. If OB8 suspects ye in the least, it’s over.” And they both knew very well what that would mean for her. Claire tried to respond but nothing came out. She knew he was right. She sank down on the desk top behind her. “Malva has been the enemy for the past three years,” Claire said softly. “But I realized in Hamburg that she wants OB8 to burn almost as much as I do.”

“As far as MI-6 is concerned, the only thing worse than OB8 getting its hands on critical information is S Branch getting it first. Malva is still your enemy,” Jamie told her. And what he could not say, what he longed to say-as much as he wanted to take down The Federation, there was nothing in the world more important than her. Her life, her safety, her future, were more important than any mission objective. Claire nodded but said nothing more. She had to get back to Credit Guépard for a briefing.

Randall came into the briefing room with a man Claire had never seen before- he was getting the man up to speed on their investigation into Master Raymond. “This is Patrick Russell. He’s come over from Jenkins Antiquities to assist us,” Randall said. Jenkins was one of OB8’s front companies and the same one that employed her Uncle Lamb. “The code Claire recovered from Hamburg led us to Athens, but the team found nothing. And we were there first. Turns out we were looking in the wrong place,” Randall continued.

“The code translated to two numbers, which we assumed meant longitude and latitude. But he was using a compression scheme. I should have caught that,” Ned said. “It turns out the correct location was actually Marbella, Spain.”

“And that’s where you’re going, Claire,” Randall said. “There’s an old church there sitting on the exact location of Master Raymond’s coordinates.”

“What am I looking for?” Claire asked. “We don’t know,” Randall said. “The only clue we have, if it is indeed a clue, were two words from the first part of the code- ‘golden sun.’”

As much as she still couldn’t believe she was chasing the trail of an alleged 18th century time traveler, Claire soon found herself in the church in Marbella. She stood facing the altar but didn’t see anything resembling a sun. She scanned the walls, the floors, having no idea what she was looking for but hoping she would know it when she saw it. Turning her back on the altar, she started moving towards the rear of the church. Thankfully it was small, only one room. When she turned, she looked up and saw a stained-glass window high on the back wall. In the middle of the window was a golden disk. That had to be it. Claire ran to the back of the church, keeping her eyes alert for any threats. She had to climb on a table to reach the window. Even though it looked like a part of the stained-glass from a distance, when she touched the disk, she found it was loose and could be turned, almost as though it were screwed into place. She carefully turned it until it fell loose from the window and she caught it in her other hand. She jumped down from the table and was ready to go when she felt an arm come around her neck and a gun at her temple. “I was hoping you’d come.” It was Malva.

Claire spun around quickly, knocked the gun from Malva’s hand and the fight was on. They went back and forth, up and down the center aisle of the church. Malva knocked the disk from Claire’s
hand and it rolled under a nearby bench. Malva knocked Claire back far enough that she was able to retrieve her gun from the floor and Claire had to dive between the rows of benches for cover. The mistake Malva made was assuming Claire was out of the fight. She walked forward to retrieve the disk where it landed on the floor and was caught completely off guard when Claire swung one of the benches at her. Finally, Claire was able to subdue Malva enough to handcuff her to the leg of a table in the middle of the church. Malva struggled to free herself but she knew it was no use. Claire retrieved the disk and walked away with the satisfaction of Malva’s rueful smile fresh in her mind.

When Claire returned with the disk, she saw Lamb come into the office. He seemed very focused on where he was going but she quickly rose from her desk to follow him. “Uncle Lamb,” she said when she caught up to him in the hallway. “You have a meeting with Randall?”

“MacCullough. Routine psych evaluation. I’m not looking forward to it, of course, but it’s the nature of the job,” he replied. “So, Hamburg worked out well,” Claire said. “My meeting with S Branch- I got the code. Your plan was smart.”

“Well, I should be going,” Lamb said, clearly anxious to be away from her. Claire didn’t really know why she continued to try with him. She felt as though she hardly knew him at all anymore. But they had been closer once. And he was the only family she had left. “Uncle Lamb,” she called out to him again to halt him as he had already turned to walk away. “Could we have dinner? How about Thursday? Do you have plans?”

“No,” he said haltingly. “Dinner on Thursday would be fine.” She gave him a small smile and he went on his way. Baby steps, Claire thought. It was only dinner, but at least it was something.

“Analysis is still working on the disk you brought back from Spain, Claire,” Randall said in the briefing room later, where they were joined by Joe, Ned, and Patrick Russell. “But we already know that it isn’t glass. It is made of a synthetic polymer and it is over two hundred years old.”

“You mean, before there were synthetic polymers?” Joe asked incredulously. It seemed too fantastic to be real, but how could they dispute the evidence? “Yes, so the mystery continues. But while they continue to do their work, we have a new issue,” Randall said. He turned and clicked the remote control in his hand to start playing a video showing angry protesters throwing rocks and bottles.

“This is footage from last year’s World Trade Organization Leadership Conference. There were dozens of protests and planned attacks targeting the conference, including by the French terror group No Shield. We are expecting much the same this year.”

“Jacques Pinard should be landing in Libya in the next 48 hours,” Patrick continued. “Wait,” Claire interjected. “I thought Pinard was in prison for stabbing a police officer.”

“He was released early- over two years early. Clearly, he has ties to French Justice,” Patrick explained. “Our intel indicates he is traveling to Libya to meet a client.”

“Who’s the client?” Joe asked. “That’s what you’re going to find out,” Randall told them. Claire and Joe would be going to conduct surveillance on the meeting to try to identify Pinard’s client and hopefully discover what kind of attack he was planning. Claire was excited to be traveling to Libya again- their in-country contact, a man named Khaled, was a friend that she and Joe had worked with several times before. They got their mission tech briefing from Ned and headed out.
Claire was supposed to meet Jamie at a car wash later that afternoon to get instructions for her counter-mission in Libya, but he was late. She saw a blur of movement beside her as he arrived. He was clearly upset and distracted. “Sorry I’m late,” he said. Claire waited for him to gather himself. “We knew about the meeting between Pinard and the client, but not the location. We also don’t know why OB8 is interested.”

“Did you have a fight with your girlfriend?” Claire asked. She knew she was fishing but she couldn’t seem to make her mouth obey her brain. She also knew her question was completely unprofessional, but his mind was clearly somewhere else. He hurriedly fumbled out, “Girlfriend? What girlfriend? I have no girlfriend.”

“Oh, well I saw that picture in your office of you with that dark-haired woman. I just assumed she was either your wife or your girlfriend,” Claire told him. Shut up, Beauchamp, she told herself.

“You thought I was dating her? This whole time?” Jamie asked. She simply shrugged in answer—she had to rein in her runaway tongue somehow. Jamie, on the other hand, was desperately trying to focus on giving Claire her counter-mission while trying to ignore the explosion of hope in his heart over the fact that she was trying to clarify his relationship status. Work first, he told himself. “Once you get back from Libya, just dial the usual number and press ’8.’ Then you can dead drop the details of the who and what of Pinard’s meeting with the client.” He looked over to see her nod.

“Why did you ask me if I had a fight with a girlfriend?”

“I don’t know,” Claire said, evading. “Did you?”

“Aye, and a great strammash it was— but not with a girlfriend. The woman in the picture is my sister, Jenny. She’s married to my partner, Agent Murray. And she’s as stubborn as a pile of rocks.”

Sister. She’s his sister. Claire couldn’t help her immense relief. He was single. Ironically, Jenny had been pestering Jamie about getting himself a girlfriend. It was one of her favorite fights to pick with him, how he needed to settle down and have bairns so he could carry on the Fraser name. Jamie wanted those things too; he just didn’t want his sister nagging him about it. The bottom line was he had never dated anyone he felt strongly enough about to bind his life to theirs. It was easy to blame his lack of dating on his job, but now he had an entirely different reason for putting Jenny off. He was waiting for Claire. “Good luck in Libya,” he said quietly. They went their separate ways, each having found an unexpected ray of enlightenment from their meeting.

Joe and Claire stood on the curb outside the airport in Libya. All they could see was a mass of cars, people, and dust. Finally, Claire spotted Khaled and reached over to touch Joe’s arm to get his attention. They made their way over to his car, smiling. “Well, look at you,” he said in his big, booming voice. Khaled had been recruited two years before and his quick mind and friendly personality had instantly endeared him to both Claire and Joe. After exchanging greetings, Khaled said, “The meeting is on. It is taking place in a local market and I’ve got a great spot for us to observe the proceedings. We still don’t have any word on the mysterious client, though.” They piled in the car and headed for the market.

Khaled was right—this was a great spot. He and Joe were setting up the surveillance equipment on the second floor of the building housing the market. It overlooked the entire selling floor, giving them an expansive view, but the arched openings were covered with curtains to conceal them from the vendors and customers below. Claire wore a strawberry blonde braided wig, a bohemian outfit complete with kerchief and rose-colored glasses, and she carried the special handbag Ned made her with a concealed parabolic microphone so they could listen in and record the meeting. “Is this working?” Claire said as she pulled the cover off the microphone on the bag. “Mic’s hot,” Joe confirmed. “Well then, I’m going shopping,” Claire said lightly, smiling as she walked toward the
stairs and down to the floor. They already had a visual on Pinard but the client still hadn’t arrived. Claire moved through the market, keeping one eye on Pinard while looking through baskets and other wares. A few minutes went by, and then Claire spotted someone approaching Pinard accompanied by what looked to be a personal bodyguard. She flipped the cover off the microphone and said in a low voice, “Joe, he’s here. The client is here.” She slid her way through the crowd so she could get as close as possible without giving herself away. “Ok, got him. Stand by, Claire,” Joe said. Khaled downloaded the pictures and ran down the hall to try to get a quick ID on the client. Claire started haggling with a vendor over a woven carpet to cover the fact that she wasn’t moving anymore, but the client’s bodyguard looked her way and she quickly ducked her head. “Joe,” she whispered urgently, “the client’s bodyguard, I know him. Remember Qatar last year? The bloody bastard broke my arm!” The guard was already moving her way after whispering something to his boss. Claire was trying to work back through the crowd while Joe and Khaled were trying to quickly pack up all their equipment knowing their cover was blown. The bodyguard was faster than his size would indicate and as Claire reached the stairs, he spun her around with his hand gripping her arm. “Hey, I know you,” he said. Claire decided her only chance was to feign ignorance. She called up her best ‘innocent American college student’ accent and said, “I’m sorry. Are you talking to me?”

“Yeah,” he said back, “and I think you remember me, too.” And with that, he pushed her through a curtain into a side room of the market. She hit the floor and he followed behind her. “Now, you’re going to tell me exactly what you’re doing here or this time I’m going to do more than just break your arm,” he said as he pulled a knife. “I’m sorry, I really have no idea who you are,” Claire tried one more time as he kept moving toward her. But she was ready. She kicked up a small table into her grasp and swung it at him, knocking the knife from his grasp. He got his forearm around her neck, but she used the wall to flip herself over and then took a few swings with a metal pot to knock him out. Claire ran for the stairs, shouting for Joe. When she reached the second floor, she was stopped in her tracks at the sight of Khaled, shot and bleeding on the floor. Suddenly, Joe appeared from around the corner- he was in a fight and it was two against one. Claire didn’t want to leave Khaled but knew she had to help Joe first. Together, they fought off the two remaining guards and Claire helped Joe grab the rest of their equipment. She returned to Khaled but knew it was too late. He was already gone. Joe stood behind her in the hallway as Claire tenderly reached out a hand to say a final goodbye to their friend. “We have to go,” he said, gently but firmly. Claire pulled back her hand, which shook as she saw Khaled’s blood on her palm.
There was no recovery time for Claire once she returned to Inverness- she was supposed to be meeting her Uncle Lamb for dinner that night. She hugged Geillis on her way back out of their flat, clinging a little longer than usual. Everything inside her felt like it was balancing on a razor’s edge. Claire arrived at the restaurant first and ordered herself a cup of tea while she waited for Lamb, attempting to warm up her insides. She felt cold, had felt cold since before she left Libya. She told her waiter she was expecting someone after fifteen minutes of sitting by herself. Half an hour. Forty-five minutes. After nearly an hour, her phone rang. She answered immediately, “Hello?”

“The man in Libya,” her uncle’s voice responded. “I’m sorry. I’m not going to be able to make dinner. Work is just . . . I can’t get away.” She could tell by the tone of his voice that he was lying. He was putting her off, avoiding her, keeping her at arm’s length. Just as he had since they arrived in Scotland. “It’s fine,” Claire said. Tired. She was so tired. “I’ll just see you at . . . I’ll just see you,” she told him blankly. “Ok, bye,” he said quietly. Claire started to shake as she hung up her phone. Her emotions and her exhaustion were building into a tidal wave that she wasn’t going to be able to stop from breaking much longer. She saw it coming and felt powerless to stop it. So, like a person who knew they were about to drown, she grabbed for the only life line her clouded mind could see. She reached in her purse and pulled out her MI-6 phone.

Friar’s Bridge overlooked the River Ness and was a popular spot for sightseers and tourists as well as locals, especially on a beautiful clear night. Claire and Jamie stood a few feet apart from each other and looked for all the world like two strangers who had just happened to stop and admire the lights shining on the water. But Claire stood at the guard rail with tears streaming down her face. “I’m sorry,” she said through her sobs. “I just didn’t know who else to call. I was supposed to have dinner with my uncle tonight, for the first time in years. I can’t even remember the last time. He just didn’t show. He said he had work, he didn’t have work,” she said. Her voice was broken, halting. Jamie felt every syllable and every sob like a dagger to his insides. “This isn’t just about my uncle. That man in Libya, the one who died? He was a friend of mine. He was a good man who thought he was working for the good guys. He was lied to, and now he’s dead. I had his blood on my hands.” She held her hands out in front of her, palms up, as if she could still see the blood on them even now, even after she had nearly scrubbed them raw. They were shaking. Would she ever stop shaking? “I feel like I’m losing my mind, like I don’t even know who I am anymore or what I’m doing, or why I’m doing it . . .” she paused as she heard the text tone from her OB8 cell phone. She made a sound of distressed frustration, pulled out her phone, and threw it over the railing into the water. After a moment’s pause, Jamie said quietly, “You just threw your phone into the river.”

How did he do that? How did he know exactly when to speak and what to say to her? She choked out a laugh on a sob and said, “I know.” He turned his body slightly towards her- not enough to attract attention, but enough to get her attention. “There’s something ye need to know, Sassenach,” he said. Claire had heard the term for an outlander before but coming from him she wasn’t
offended. She could tell he didn’t mean it as an insult. “When you first came to my office- with that foolish Bozo hair? I thought you were crazy. I actually thought you might have been a crazy person. But I watched you, I read your statement. I’ve seen how you think, how you work. I’ve seen who you are. In this job, we see darkness, we see the worst in people, aye? And even though the jobs are different, and the missions change, and the enemies have a thousand names, the one crucial thing, the one real responsibility we have is to not allow our rage and our disgust and our resentment to darken us. When ye’re at yer absolute lowest, at yer most depressed, just remember that ye can always . . . well, ye know. Ye have my number.” Claire looked over at him, still crying but not as hard now. And it suddenly wasn’t enough. He had thrown her the life line, by his words, by listening to her, by his very presence. But she felt she couldn’t take hold of it completely until she took hold of him. So, she did. She turned her head back to look out over the water as she reached out and grabbed his hand on the rail. And just as she had the first time they touched, she felt the electricity shoot through her skin.

Jamie felt it, too. It was the first touch they had ever shared that was completely personal. They were not handler and asset at that moment. They were simply Jamie and Claire. The power of it was enough to nearly bring him to his knees. The want of her was a living thing careening through his blood- but it wasn’t merely physical. He had been physically attracted to plenty of women in his life. The sensation was nothing new. But while he longed to take her in his arms to possess her body, he also wanted to hold her, to soothe her, to whisper gently to her and tell her everything was going to be alright and that he would never leave her to fight her demons alone. He had never felt this kind of all-consuming desire to protect and shelter and support a woman before. And while he couldn’t yet do all the things his heart and his body longed for, he would do what he could for now. He pulled his hand from the railing, quickly linked it with hers, and squeezed. Then slowly, gently, he began to gently stroke the base of her thumb with his. For each of them, the world narrowed to that single point where skin touched skin. And even though it lasted mere moments, they both felt it. Peace. Comfort. Home.

In the briefing room the next day, Randall pulled up the surveillance photos and the audio recording from the meeting in Libya. “The man whose voice is on this recording, Pinard’s client, is Omar Abboud. He specializes in demolition. His conversation with Pinard indicates that they are planning on planting an explosive device on one of the delegates at the World Trade Organization Leadership Conference. Joe, you and Claire are heading to Santiago,” Randall told them. They would be given fake papers to attend the opening reception and protect the delegate mentioned in the recording to make sure the plot failed.

Claire and Joe were on opposite sides of the reception, keeping eyes out for their target who had yet to arrive. Claire spotted him when he entered, drink already in hand. “Joe, I have a twenty on Sheikh. He just walked in.”

“Ok, I’m making my way over to him now,” Joe replied. “Wait, something’s wrong,” Claire said. “He looks sick.” After a moment, she told Joe, “He just went down.”

“Does he have a drink?” Joe asked. Claire confirmed and was already moving in that direction when Joe said, “Get the glass.” Playing the concerned bystander, Claire crouched down next to the unconscious delegate and held his glass behind her back. A man who identified himself as a doctor hurried over and began checking Sheikh. Meanwhile, Claire walked over to Joe and handed him the drinking glass. Joe went into the hallway so he could test the liquid for drugs away from prying eyes while Claire went back toward Sheikh, who was being loaded into an ambulance. “LJ, his drink is
spiked. Probably a designer benzo,” Joe told her. “Ok, see what you can find out. I’m going to follow Sheikh.” She shrugged as she climbed on a motorcycle parked in front of the hotel. Wouldn’t be the first time she had broken the law trying to save the world.

Instead of going to the hospital, the ambulance carrying Sheikh drove to a remote industrial area on the outskirts of the city. Claire parked the motorcycle outside the fence then made her way towards the tented area where they wheeled the stretcher. From high above in an adjacent building still under construction, Claire used a small pen-sized spyglass Ned gave her to be able to look down on what was happening below. It looked like a field hospital, a makeshift operating room. Standing beside the stretcher, she spotted the two men she recognized from Libya- Pinard and Abboud. She could do nothing but watch in horror as someone took a scalpel and cut open Sheikh’s chest. But they weren’t killing him. At least, not yet. Knowing Abboud’s expertise, she surmised that the small device they implanted in Sheikh’s chest a short time later was not a simple pacemaker. Pinard’s plan to attack the conference was not to plant explosives on a delegate. It was to plant explosives inside a delegate. She was vaguely aware of her mouth hanging open but couldn’t seem to close it. Before she could even begin to formulate a plan for how to deal with the situation at hand, she was dragged onto her feet from behind and found herself face-to-face with Abboud’s bodyguard whom she had last seen in Libya. She saw his enormous fist coming towards her face; then she was hurtled into unconsciousness.

Claire’s unconscious form was dragged by the bodyguard, pulling her by the strap of her tank top down a long, underground tunnel. When she regained consciousness, he had her up against a wall with his hand around her neck. He was asking her questions, wanted to know what she was doing there, whether she was there alone or with someone else- but he wouldn’t loosen his grip long enough for her to respond. Losing patience, he finally swung open a door at the end of the tunnel. It was the trash incinerator. “If you don’t tell me why you’re here, I will throw you into the fire,” he said as he continued to choke her. Although still quite fuzzy in the head, Claire saw her only chance for escape in his shirt pocket. She grabbed the pen she saw there, clicked it to expose the tip, then jabbed it into his shoulder. It didn’t do much damage, but it startled him enough that he finally let go of her. She fought him, aided by a timely swing from the incinerator door to his face, then took off running down the tunnel. He hadn’t been knocked out, however, and still managed to radio for backup. Everywhere she turned in the maze of tunnels she saw more guards and more guns, until finally she came to a dead end. Her only way out was through a metal drain pipe high up on the wall. She climbed up, pulled the grate off the opening and slid down into the pipe. She grabbed onto one of the welding points to stop herself as the pipe plunged deeper into the darkness, but the gunshots from above were a greater threat. She said a quick and desperate prayer then slid down into the dark.

Claire woke to a Chilean boy poking her, trying to figure out if she was dead. It was full daylight and she was lying on the ground near the exit point of the drainage pipe. She sat up in a panic- she had to get back to the conference and get to Sheikh before the bomb detonated. The boy helped her get to a bus and once she boarded, she borrowed someone’s phone to call Joe. “Thank God,” he said when he heard her voice. “I didn’t sleep last night, LJ. Where the hell are you?”

“That doesn’t matter right now. Listen to me. Have you spotted Sheikh?”

“He just showed up,” Joe said from the lobby of the conference site as he looked towards the door. “The news agencies are all reporting that he had an arrhythmia. Where did they take him?”

“Joe, what I’m about to say is going to sound mad, but you have to believe me,” Claire said. “Of course,” Joe said without hesitation. Claire took a breath and blurted out, “The bomb we’re looking
for? It’s inside of him.”

“What?” Claire didn’t blame Joe for questioning her—she watched it happen and she still didn’t quite believe it herself. “It’s inside Sheikh. They implanted the bomb in his chest, just like a pacemaker. It’s a simple outpatient procedure, which Pinard and Abboud just used to turn a delegate into a human bomb. Clearly that isn’t good.”

“Did you see the device?” Joe asked. Claire looked up in gratitude for the millionth time for her gem of a partner. Joe’s level head was exactly what she needed when she felt like she wanted to panic. “Yes,” she told him. “It’s small, which means it is probably on a wireless remote. Look, I’m on my way. *Get Sheikh*. I will meet you behind the auditorium.”

“I’ll get there as soon as I can,” Joe replied. Claire handed the phone back and willed the bus to go faster. The conference was about to begin.

Joe followed Sheikh into the room where he was waiting before making his speech at the opening ceremony of the conference. He tried to talk the lone security guard out of the room but eventually had to resort to using his fists when verbal persuasion proved insufficient. He wound up having to do the same with Sheikh, apologizing profusely as he hit the man and draped him across his shoulders to carry him out of the building. Meanwhile, outside, Claire went up to an ambulance stationed at the conference and pretended to collapse. The driver got out of the ambulance and ran around to the passenger side to assist her. Claire was running around to the driver’s side at the same time and took off in the ambulance before the driver even realized what was happening. She pulled up to the back door of the auditorium just as Joe came out carrying Sheikh. He laid the unconscious man on the stretcher. Claire climbed into the back of the ambulance from the driver’s seat. “Did you ID the trigger?” Joe shook his head. “No. I didn’t see anyone.” They turned back to their ‘patient’ and Claire knelt beside him to open his shirt. Joe placed an oxygen mask over his face and Claire injected a sedative into his arm. Joe looked at her, searching her face. “I know that you’ve had some basic field medical training, LJ. But can you really do this? Pull a bomb out of a man’s chest?”

“Yes, I can,” she said with more confidence than she felt. Just then, they looked out the back of the ambulance and saw a car speeding toward them. It had to be Pinard and Abboud. The remote trigger wouldn’t work unless it was within a certain range of the bomb. “We have to go,” Joe said to Claire as he climbed into the driver’s seat. Joe drove off as fast as he could while Claire started pulling the surgical staples from the night before out of Sheikh’s chest. “Don’t let them get too close, Joe,” Claire shouted as she continued to work, cringing at every bump in the road and every hard curve as Joe tried to keep their pursuers at bay. She re-opened the incision and reached into Sheikh’s chest. “I can feel the bomb!” she told Joe. “Claire, the police have set up a road block up ahead,” Joe shouted back. “Get around it,” she told him. Her vision had tunneled. She had narrowed all her focus down to the man in front of her. But something was wrong. She could feel the bomb, but she couldn’t pull it out. “Joe, I think they put some kind of adhesive on this incision, and it’s stuck to the bomb.” She kept working it, with both hands, and was finally able to pull it loose. And then it started to beep. “What’s that?” Joe shouted. “It’s on a delay,” Claire told him. “Just keep driving!” She pulled opened the back door of the ambulance and threw the bomb out. The car behind them turned into a ball of fire. “Nicely done,” Joe said with a wry smile.
Chapter Summary

When I was re-watching Alias recently, it really bugged me that Sydney and Vaughn never took advantage of all their clandestine meetings at the storage warehouse (if you've seen the show you know what I mean). But the nice thing about re-telling the story is that I get to fix things like that, to tell the story the way I think it should go. All that to say: this chapter is NSFW ;) (and it's my first time writing it, so be kind!).

ENJOY!

“That’s madness,” Jamie said to Claire at their next meeting. “I know,” she said, still excited.

“You just . . . pulled the bomb out of him? Out of Sheikh?”

“Yes,” she told him again.

“Ye pulled a bomb out of Abdul Sheikh?” Jamie knew she was incredible, but this was truly beyond anything he had ever heard.

“I did,” she said, with no small amount of pride. She was also ridiculously pleased that Jamie was so impressed with her story. And what she didn’t say, what she was still holding somewhere deep inside herself, was the feeling she had while she was doing it. The feeling of having another person’s life in her hands and being able to use her own hands to give life back to someone lit something inside her. For now, it was a tiny flame. But maybe someday, in another life, the life she dreamed of building, it could be more.

“Damn, Sassenach,” he shook his head in wonder. “And did you have any luck with the Federation member?”

“The what?” Claire looked at him in momentary confusion. “You were supposed to identify the Federation member OB8 was trying to protect in Santiago . . .”

“Yes, thank you, I remember. No, I didn’t get it,” Claire told him. “Claire, if we’re to take down OB8 . . .” Jamie started.

“Stop, no.” She wasn’t angry, and neither was he, but they were off, talking over each other again. Claire knew that stopping the bombing and saving the life of Sheikh and everyone else at the conference was rightly her top priority. But Jamie was trying to remind her of the bigger picture. Neither was wrong. They just couldn’t convince the other that they were right, especially when they were running over each other’s words.

“Fine.” He ended the flow of words with a simple concession. They weren’t going to be able to win every battle in this long war. “I have to go do some class work,” Claire said quietly, and stood to go. Jamie felt like he had to stop her. He didn’t want their meeting to end this way. What he really wanted was to regain the closeness they’d felt on the bridge, but this wasn’t the right time or place. He just couldn’t let her go without her knowing that he’d been thinking of her while she was away.

“Hold on,” he said as she walked by him towards the door. “I have something for you.” Claire paused as he reached into his briefcase and pulled out a thick file folder. “I know you have a lot of
questions about your uncle. I don’t know if you want this, but I copied his personnel file.” Claire was surprised, but not upset. More than anything, she was curious. She did have questions. So many questions. And he was giving her a chance to get at least some of them answered. She stepped forward and took the file from his hands, with a whispered, “Thank you,” the only words she could muster. But her eyes spoke what her mouth could not. And what passed between her whiskey golds and his ocean blues filled the silence and pulsed in the air around them.

In the briefing room at OB8 the next day, Randall was laying out the specifics of Claire and Joe’s next mission, with Ned in attendance to provide their op tech. “This is the headquarters of the Henschel Corporation in Munich,” he said, pointing at the picture on the monitor behind him. “They are a pharmaceutical conglomerate- they make toothpaste, hand soap, shaving cream. But they also have a multi-million Euro research and development fund with links back to World War II and the Third Reich.” He paused for emphasis. “They don’t include the last part in their annual stock report.” He clicked to the next photograph, which was quite dated. “This is Gerhard Schechter. He works in biotech for Henschel, lives in Munich. We’ve been in communication with him since last August about a vaccine Henschel is developing against biological weapons. In his last communication, Schechter said he wants to make a trade.”

“What does he want in exchange for the vaccine?” Claire asked. “Safe passage into the United Kingdom,” Randall replied. “Wait,” Joe said, perplexed. “He lives in Munich. Why can’t he just get in a taxi and go to the airport if he wants to come here?”

“The problem is not Germany; the problem is Henschel,” Randall explained. “They closely monitor all upper-level staff members. Now unfortunately, we do not have a recent photograph of Schechter. This one is from when he was in university in the 1980s. We’ve had analysis perform an age enhancement to give us an idea of what he might look like now,” he said, handing them each a folder with a photograph inside. “Claire, Henschel is going through an intranet systems upgrade- you will be going in as a tech supervisor. Joe will be backing you up from outside. Your mission is to identify Schechter and extract him for shipment to the UK. You will also download the vaccine data from Henschel’s computers. Ned, go.”

Ned stood and showed them what looked like an ordinary business card. “This is a transmitter that will allow you to trick Henschel’s computer system into thinking you are a system administrator. All you must do is rest it on Schechter’s computer and it will give you access to the entire system. You will download the vaccine data and then we will get the password from Schechter when he arrives here.”

In the hallway with Joe after their briefing, they ran into Lamb. She hadn’t seen him since he had stood her up for dinner the night she wound up meeting Jamie on the bridge. “Joe, if it’s no bother, I would like to speak to Claire alone for a moment,” he said.

“Of course,” Joe said. “I will see you in Op Tech later, LJ.” He gave her a look of reassurance and walked away. “I’m sorry about what happened last week,” Lamb told her when they were alone. “I’ve been trying to coordinate shipment of an artifact from Egypt and everything seemed to be falling apart. I just couldn’t get away.”

“Yes, you mentioned that on the phone,” Claire said quietly but firmly. “It’s fine.”

“It’s a very busy time for me right now. I am overseeing six cases at the moment. It is probably better for us to not make any plans for now,” he said. Grown-up Claire understood that this was simply the way things were between her and her uncle and nothing was likely to change that. But the piece of Claire that was still that orphaned 5-year-old girl couldn’t help but bleed a little inside.
every time he took another step away from her. “I wasn’t going to pursue it,” she said simply, trying to keep her hurt locked away. He looked relieved. And she may have been imagining it, but she also thought there might have been a little bit of hurt on his face, too. “Alright. I just wanted to clarify,” he said, though his voice was not quite as formal as he was trying to make it. As usual, Claire walked away from an encounter with her Uncle Lamb feeling confused and unsettled.

That night, after executing her dead drop protocol, Claire drove to meet Jamie at a storage warehouse outside Inverness. To her surprise, Jamie stood talking to another man when she arrived. She saw her approach and she noted to herself that he was firmly in business mode. “Claire, this is Percy Kanter, he’s been an agent with MI-6 for quite some time,” Jamie said as she reached out to shake the other man’s hand. “I know your uncle,” Kanter said to her. “I hear that a lot,” Claire said with as much calm as she could muster thinking of her recent meeting with him. “MI-6 has been after Henschel for years,” Jamie told her. “The army has been doing parallel research which they thought was years ahead- until they received your intel. There are serious concerns that if OB8 gets their hands on the vaccine they could sell it to a radical leader who wants to use it to protect his own people so he can start an all-out biological war.” Claire shuddered at the thought. “What do I do in Munich?”

“Ye’ll go through with your OB8 mission as planned, but instead of shipping Schechter to them, you will send Percy instead. He’s been trained to impersonate Schechter and according to our projections he’s pretty close in appearance as well. You’ll make the switch in the building’s garage,” Jamie said. “Are you certain you’re ready for this?” Claire asked Kanter. “I’m not looking forward to it, if that’s what you mean,” he said with a wry smile. “What about when Randall wants you to give him the vaccine?” Claire wanted to know that Kanter was going to be safe. She knew the ruthlessness of her boss better than anyone. “He will be giving them false information,” Jamie said. “Now, Agent Kanter has a plane to catch.”

“I will see you in Munich,” he said to Claire as he turned to leave. “Alright,” she replied. She looked at Jamie and said, “I have to tell Joe.”

“No. Ye canna do that, Claire. Absolutely not,” Jamie said emphatically. “How am I supposed to make a double switch invisible to my partner? He’ll be there,” Claire said. “Ye canna tell him the truth. He might already know who he’s really working for,” Jamie pointed out. Claire was already shaking her head before he had even finished his sentence. “You don’t know him. But I do.” She was as sure as she had ever been of anything in her life that Joe was not knowing participant in OB8’s lies. Jamie sighed. “Aye, ye might be right about Joe. But you can’t volunteer a man for double agent duty if he hasn’t asked for it. Think about it- you’re putting his life, his family at risk. Is that really a decision you want to make for him?” Claire knew that he was right. She had known what she was getting into when she decided to become a double agent. She knew the risks and she had willingly decided to subject herself to those risks in order to accomplish her goal to destroy OB8 and The Federation. She couldn’t subject Joe to the same risks, even with her certainty that he was an innocent in this tangled web just as she was before Frank’s murder. Her brain accepted the logic without too much difficulty, but her heart shook. She felt a rush of emotion welling inside her at the thought of her friend, her partner, a man she thought of as the brother she’d never had. Her eyes started to fill with moisture, and she raised a fist to her mouth to cut off the release of a sob. She walked away from Jamie and leaned her forehead against the wall as she tried to pull herself back together.

She felt him following behind her without looking up, knew that he was close, so she spoke softly, her voice unsteady. “I was used to lying to people. It’s part of the job. I lied to my friends, my professors, Frank. But my friends at OB8 knew who and what I really was. I didn’t have to hide
from them. And it was a relief. Now that I’m a double agent that’s all changed. There’s no relief now, no respite. I’m lying to every single person in my life—except you.” She felt his hand on her arm, that same electricity. “Sassenach,” he said, turning her to face him. He desperately wanted to share her burden, for her to know that she could always tell him the truth and he would always be there to carry it with her. But with her standing so close that he could smell the scent of her shampoo (vanilla and citrus) in her curls, he wanted so much more. The want of her was in the very blood rushing through his veins. It was in the pounding chambers of his heart, the nerves that prickled on his skin, the breath that clogged in his lungs. It was woven into the very fabric of his being and it wouldn’t end until he did. Even then, it would live on in his soul, his essence soaked in her for all eternity. He took another step forward, bringing their bodies even closer together and Claire drew in a quick, unsteady breath as she brought her hand up to his arm. She knew, somehow, that Jamie wouldn’t be the one to take the final step over the line, the wall of protocol between handler and asset. So, she did it for him. She raised her face to where his had lowered towards her and barely brushed her lips over his, once, twice, a question asked with no words.

Jamie’s control snapped. Just from that. He grabbed her waist with one hand, twined his other in her curls, and met her lips with a passion bordering on fury. And he moaned, a sound akin to pain, when Claire responded with equal fervor.

For Claire, it was as if she had been hibernating and suddenly every cell in her body was awake, alive, and pulsing with energy, all of it flowing towards him. She couldn’t get close enough. She couldn’t get enough of his taste. She finally got to run her fingers through the curls at the nape of his neck and realized that her imagination didn’t even come close to doing justice to the feeling of them. Their tongues danced and darted and if it wasn’t for the wall at her back she didn’t even know if she would still be upright. Claire had always enjoyed sex and found her sex life with Frank very satisfying if not particularly adventurous. But she had never gone weak in the knees and damp between her thighs from one kiss.

Jamie was also finding his fantasies, detailed as they were, to be woefully inadequate to the reality that was Claire. Her mouth was an addiction, her curls running through his fingers were silk, her body against his was heaven. He tore his mouth from hers so that he could trail his over the unbelievably soft skin of her jaw, her ear lobe, down her throat. He heard her whimper and moan and it was the most incredible sound he’d ever heard, and it landed directly in his groin. He was always in at least a partial state of arousal every time he was around her, but the reality of his mouth on hers and her body pressed against his was so potent he was throbbing with it. He finally managed to loosen his fingers from her hair, and he ran his hands down the sides of her body and around to grip her arse. “Christ, Claire,” he gasped out as if he’d been running for miles.

She wouldn’t quite remember later how it happened, (Did he lift her? Did she jump? Both?) but suddenly Claire found herself off the ground with her legs locked like iron bands around his waist. With her back against the wall he was thrusting his hips at her while she gripped his hair and kissed him with everything she had. “Oh God, Jamie,” she moaned as his mouth plundered hers. Jamie’s eyes watered with how hard she was pulling his hair, but it didn’t matter. She wanted to crawl inside him, so desperate was her need to get as close as she could. Claire realized, somewhere in the tiny corner of her brain that wasn’t roaring with lust, that he could actually take her right here, against the wall. If their clothes were out of the way, he probably would. And she couldn’t come up with a single reason why he shouldn’t. Until she heard her phone. It was her OB8 phone. It was her alarm going off, her reminder that she needed to get to the airport to catch her flight to Munich. The mission. She’d completely forgotten, forgotten everything from the moment he’d touched her arm.

They both pulled back and rested their foreheads together, pulling in air like there wasn’t enough in the room. Claire unlocked her legs and slid slowly down his body, both of them shuddering at the contact. One of his hands reached up to cup her cheek and she leaned into it and brought her hand
up to cover his. “Claire, I...” he said, voice shaky, barely audible. “Shhh, it’s alright,” she whispered back and brought a finger up to rest on his lips. She would not stand for an apology. If they had broken the rules, they had done it together, eyes open, fully aware of the consequences if they were discovered. She would not allow him to bear the responsibility alone. “We’ll talk when I get back,” she said gently. “I promise.” He kissed her finger where it still rested on his lips. “Aye,” he said softly. He couldn’t let her leave without saying it. “Be careful.” She nodded and slipped around him to leave. As she walked away, under his breath, he whispered, “Mo chridhe.” My heart. He stood and stared after her long after she’d gone, still feeling the shapes of her under his hands and the burn of her mouth on his.
Claire walked into the headquarters of Henschel Corporation in Munich the next day while Joe waited across the street. She handed her business card with today’s identity to the guard, addressing him in flawless German, and he escorted her to the elevator. As soon as the door closed, she said to Joe, “I’m in.”

“Copy that,” he replied. “All quiet out front.” Claire made her way through the building and walked through the door of Schechter’s office. He got an incredulous look on his face when she entered and said, “You’re the agent?” in heavily accented English. Claire simply took out the business card transmitter Ned provided her and started to download the vaccine information from Schechter’s computer. “Joe, I think someone might be following me,” Claire said, laying the ground work for her counter-mission. “Meet me behind the building.”

Joe agreed to the change in their rendezvous point, then told her, “I’m starting the stun gas now. You have two minutes before people regain consciousness.” Inside, Claire handed Schechter a gas mask and donned hers as well so they could escape the building without being overcome by the gas. When the data transmission was finished, Claire took Schechter by the arm and led him down to the underground garage. But when they reached the garage, exactly according to plan, Schechter was pushed into a waiting MI-6 van and Agent Kanter emerged to take his place. He and Claire ran out the exit of the garage towards the back of the building where Joe was waiting for them in their getaway van. Claire couldn’t quite believe it, but so far, their plan was going flawlessly.

At an MI-6 safehouse in Inverness, Gerhard Schechter was sitting on a sofa talking to Jamie and demanding to speak to Jonathan Randall. Claire, Ian, and Willie, one of the MI-6 tech officers, were watching the interaction behind a panel of one-way glass in the wall directly behind Jamie. Claire felt her pulse pounding in her ears as she watched Jamie. It was the first time they’d seen each other since their kiss, and she couldn’t help her body’s response to him. But they also weren’t alone, and she didn’t know when they would be able to talk privately. “We’ve already talked about this, Mr. Schechter,” Jamie was saying, frustration in his voice. “Randall isna here, aye? Now you give us the password . . .”

“I only deal with Randall,” Schechter told him again. “That was the agreement. And if you are who you say you are you would know that already.”

“Mr. Schechter, Randall is a liar. He has nothing to do with MI-6.” Schechter paused to light a cigarette and gestured with it to Jamie. “So, you say Randall is a fraud? How do I know it’s not you who’s the fraud?” Jamie paused while Schechter looked at him in both expectation and suspicion. “You don’t,” Jamie said simply. Schechter nodded as if this confirmed his suspicions. “But you will.” Jamie walked through the door into the observation room. He looked up at Ian and asked, “How quickly can we get him to MI-6 Headquarters in London?” Ian could usually follow Jamie’s thought processes easily having known him for so long, but he was stumped. “Alright, why are we
Jamie sighed in frustration. He had expected Schechter to be an easier nut to crack. “He doesna believe we’re MI-6, and I dinna think we’re going to be able to convince him unless we walk him through the front door.” Just then, Willie interrupted. “Hey Jamie, we’re in.” Jamie leaned over to look at the monitor over Willie’s shoulder, suddenly fascinated. Ian moved in that direction as well. Claire, however, was completely in the dark. “What’s this about?” Jamie looked over at her and gave her a glowing smile that stole her breath. “This is the main reason why we made the switch in Munich.”

Willie explained, “Agent Kanter gave Randall access to a bogus website we set up. It contains just enough real information about the vaccine to keep OB8 busy for months.” Claire could see the value in the strategy, but she was still concerned. “Is that really worth risking a man’s life?” she asked. “That’s not all,” Ian said. “Once they download and run the bogus program, it will give us back door access to their computer systems.” Claire was absolutely bowled over. She could hardly wrap her mind around the implications of what such access could mean. “So, what you’re saying is that we have access to their entire network? Files, contacts, accounts . . .”

“Aye,” Jamie said. “This is a major step in us being able to shut down OB8.”

“Well done,” Claire said breathlessly. “It was Agent Fraser’s idea,” Willie said. Jamie and Claire’s eyes met over Ian and Willie’s heads, still intent on the monitor. “Dinna look so surprised,” Jamie said with a tease in his voice. “It really was my idea.”

“Amazing idea,” Claire said. “Thank ye, Sassenach. I ken,” Jamie smirked. She smiled back, both basking in the glow of taking such a large step forward in their quest. But as their gazes held, everything else in the room seemed to fade. The temperature of the room seemed to increase, and oxygen was harder to pull into their lungs. Claire bit her lower lip and Jamie nearly groaned out loud, his mind suddenly presented with a blindingly indecent vision of Claire taking him in her mouth right there in the observation room, Ian and Willie be damned. It was Ian, however, who loudly cleared his throat and brought them both back to themselves. He looked back and forth between the two of them and shook his head. The situation had clearly escalated, although Ian did not yet know when or how. It was clear to him that Jamie was determined to have Claire. Ian just hoped it wouldn’t cost him his career in the process.

Claire wasn’t quite sure how it had happened, but somehow Geillis had convinced her to throw a party at their flat for Samhain. And she had seemingly invited almost everyone they’d ever met. Claire wasn’t a huge fan of the holiday since she wore costumes and wigs so frequently on operations. Yet, as with so many other moments in her friendship with Geillis, she could only shrug her shoulders and let herself get swept up in the whirlwind. So, Claire found herself in her Alice In Wonderland costume opening their door to Joe, Gail, and their two kids Robert and Lisa. As the children ran off in search of more candy and Gail caught up with Geillis, Joe asked Claire to come outside with him. “Is everything alright?” Claire asked him, feeling concerned. He looked upset and nervous. “We’ve been working together for a lot of years, LJ,” he started. “I trust you. I trust you and I love you.”

“I know,” Claire said, reaching out to touch his arm. “So, if something’s up you would tell me,” Joe said. It was a statement, not a question. Claire was outwardly calm, but her stomach was churning. “What are you talking about?”

“Randall is asking questions about Munich. He thinks someone may have gotten to Schechter, thinks he might be a plant. He wanted to know why you had me change the pickup location.”
“I told you.  I thought I was being followed.” Claire was looking straight into his eyes, imploring him to believe her. To believe her lie. She felt every word of their conversation like a knife twisting in her belly. She thought about her conversation with Jamie. How could she lie to Joe? But how could she risk not lying to him? He nodded- and then he asked her again. “Claire, is there something I should know?”

“No,” she repeated calmly, all the while feeling like a piece of her was dying. “Listen, Randall says there’s a prototype, an inhaler for the vaccine. He wants us to go get it, but Schechter won’t give up the location of the facility, which makes no sense. That man should know where it is and has everything to lose by not telling us.” Claire was stunned, reeling with the implications. Even though she had a very good idea of the answer, she asked, “What’s going to happen to him?”

“I think Schechter’s in trouble,” Joe said simply. “But Claire- I think you are, too.”

Later, after the party had finally wound down, Claire managed to get away and hurried back to the safehouse. Jamie and Ian were still there but looked like they were getting ready to leave when Claire burst in the door. “You can’t take him to MI-6 headquarters,” she said breathlessly. “Why? The plane leaves in an hour,” Jamie said, though his gaze was serious. He knew she wouldn’t have risked coming there again unless something had truly gone wrong. “Kanter might be dead by then,” Claire said simply. “Randall is not just looking for a password. He’s looking for information on a prototype inhaler, information Schechter would have.” She took a deep breath before she continued. “This could be it. If this goes badly, they will know that I’m a double agent.” Jamie felt his mouth hanging open but couldn’t help himself. It was bad enough that Kanter’s life was in jeopardy. But if Claire was compromised, her life was as good as over, too. And he simply couldn’t allow that. Couldn’t even allow the possibility of it. Because whether she knew it or not, his life was bound to hers now. With more force than he intended, he said, “What the hell do we do?” His capacity for planning, for strategy, for rational thought had completely deserted him. Thankfully, Claire was there to pick up the slack. “That’s why I came here. I need to talk to Schechter right now.” Jamie nodded, swallowed, and followed Claire as she turned towards the adjoining door. His hand came to rest lightly on the small of her back as they walked. It fit naturally, as if it was always meant to be there. She looked back over her shoulder at him and nodded when they reached the door. He would let her talk to Schechter alone, but she knew that he wouldn’t be far away. When she walked in, Schechter just stared at her in astonishment, clearly recognizing her from Munich.

Claire sat in a chair across from him. “Mr. Schechter, I need you to listen to me. Jonathan Randall is not affiliated with the British government. He’s just a man who used me, the same way he was going to use you. He made me believe I was giving myself to God and country, but it was all a lie. And it was a lie that cost my fiancé his life.” She looked down at her lap then back at him, hoping she was right about him. “If I go back to OB8 without the location of the plant where the vaccine inhaler prototypes are made, they will take the life of another innocent man. Only one person can stop that- and I’m talking to him right now.” The room was silent. She could see an entire range of emotions pass over Schechter’s face. He was still surprised to see her, but she also saw doubt, concern, anger, fear. He was battling with himself, trying to decide whether to trust her when for so long he had trusted Randall. But time was a luxury Claire could not afford. “Mr. Schechter, please,” she said simply. “Bonn,” he said quietly. “The plant is in Bonn.”

“Thank you,” Claire told him, and raced out of the room. She had a phone call to make.

Walking down a side street in Inverness in the middle of the night might not have been the smartest
idea, but there was nothing for it. Claire slowed on the sidewalk as she saw a car pull up alongside her. It wasn’t a conversation she wanted to have, but she accepted that her work as a double agent was going to place her in frequent contact with her Uncle Lamb. “I wouldn’t have called unless I had no other choice.”

“It’s all right,” he told her, clearly feeling the strain of their meeting as much as she did. “What is it?”

“There’s an MI-6 agent named Percy Kanter . . .”

“I know about Munich,” he stopped her. “Percy is a friend.”

“Then you should know his life is in danger. He’s in OB8 custody and Randall wants intel that Kanter doesn’t have. I have the information Kanter needs but I can’t get it to him. Randall is already too suspicious of me. But since he trusts you . . .” she trailed off. “Randall put in a call to me,” he admitted. “That must be why.”

“Why would he call you?” Here was yet another mystery regarding her uncle that seemed impenetrable to Claire. The back story of her uncle’s connection to Jonathan Randall had as many layers as an onion and was just as startlingly pungent. But it was a story for another time, another place. The issue at hand was far more vital and urgent. “Don’t worry. I will take care of it. You should get home, it’s late.” She nodded and he drove off. Her body was exhausted, but her mind was humming with questions, with worry, with fear. She had a feeling sleep would elude her tonight.

A short time later, Lamb walked into Randall’s office at OB8. He knew the role he had to play, and he put it on as easily as getting dressed in the morning. He had existed as so many different personas for so long it was second nature. The art of deception. Getting others to see exactly what you wanted them to see and no more. Randall was clearly agitated and angry, which played into Lamb’s hands perfectly. Randall would be distracted, not as alert. “We have a problem,” Randall said in clipped tones. “Schechter won’t talk. I don’t trust that man. So, I want proof.”

“Proof?” Lamb gave him a look of concern. I’m here for you, it said. You can trust me, it said. I’m your friend, it said. And since it was exactly what Randall wanted to hear, he took everything in that look at face value. “I want proof that he’s telling us everything— that he is who he says he is.”

“I understand.” Lamb replied. And he did. Get the information—by any means necessary. Lamb turned to walk down the hall to the interrogation room while Randall went to sit behind his desk. He flicked his monitor over to the closed-circuit TV feed from the camera in the interrogation room and waited. It didn’t take long for the fireworks to begin. When Lamb walked into the room, Kanter stood and was about to say his name, so Lamb promptly punched him in the face to stop him. He then shoved him into the wall and gripped his shirt in both hands. In a low voice, he whispered, “I have to prove you’re Schechter and I’m OB8. To do that, I have to hurt you.” He threw Kanter across the room and onto the ground. He walked over slowly, deliberately, then pulled Kanter up and locked his arms behind his back, whispering in his ear, “The plant is in Bonn.” Lamb pushed him down on the table in the center of the room and twisted, breaking Kanter’s arm with a sickening crack. “BONN!!” Kanter shouted in excruciating pain. “It’s in Bonn!!” Lamb let go of him and he collapsed on the floor, passing out from the pain. And in his office, a look of grim satisfaction spread over Jonathan Randall’s face.

Randall called us in this morning, Claire wrote on the paper bag for her dead drop to Jamie. Our
mission is to go to Bonn tonight, steal the vaccine inhalers and blow up the plant. She paused, biting the end of the pen as she thought. She couldn’t count on the fact that Jamie would be the only one to see what she wrote, but she couldn’t help but include some of her internal turmoil. It was bubbling out of her like a poisonous fountain. I don’t know how much longer I can do this, sit in these meetings with Randall, pretending like I don’t despise him, like I don’t want to leap across the table and use the skills I’ve learned at OB8 against him. Claire could feel it even now as she sat eating her lunch on campus. The way her fingers clenched in her lap during the briefing, imagining what it would feel like to wrap them around his throat. She took a deep breath and finished. So, what the bloody hell do I do next? What’s my counter-mission?

Later that day, Claire pulled into the petrol station, where Jamie and his car were already waiting on the other side of the pump. Claire got out and started to fill up her car, glancing over at Jamie in his work suit. She wanted to devour him. Instead, she said, “He practically apologized.”

“Randall did?” Jamie asked, although he knew she was talking about Randall. The thought of him apologizing was just that shocking. And when Claire turned towards her car, he was jolted again by the sight of her denim-clad arse, a jolt he felt from the top of his head to the bottom of his shoes and ultimately concentrating just below his belt. Thankfully he had a moment to collect himself before she turned and spoke again. “Yes, for thinking that I had sent him the wrong guy. Imagine that.” She couldn’t help a slight smirk at that, now that it was over, since that was exactly what happened.

“And yer reward for a job well done is destroying the plant in Bonn,” Jamie said, shaking his head. “Randall said Henschel is producing supplies for a neo-Nazi terrorist faction,” Claire said with a roll of her eyes. Jamie rolled his even harder. “That is such a load of shite. Randall wants the vaccine tech.”

“Why?” Claire asked, confused. “He thinks he has the formula already.” Jamie was cleaning his back windshield so she could study his profile uninterrupted. “Aye, but it took Henschel five years to go from formula to prototype,” he told her. “Randall wants to skip that step.” Claire nodded, then asked, “How’s Kanter?” Jamie’s smile was full of relief. “He’s home with his family, arm in a cast. He’ll be fine.”

“What about Schechter?” Claire hoped everything would turn out well for him, too. He had been an unwitting pawn of Randall’s and she knew the feeling all too well. “He’s on his way somewhere in the Highlands with 200,000 pounds of Randall’s money in his pocket. Of all of us, I’d say he’s the luckiest,” Jamie said with a small shake of his head. “I would have to agree,” Claire said. “So, what is my counter?”

His nerves were firing, as they always did when she was around, but discussing her counter-missions always gave him a frisson of fear. There were so many things that could go wrong. But he felt better this time because she wouldn’t be alone. “Alright, you’ll break into the building as planned. While Joe sets the explosives, you’ll retrieve the inhalers. Then you will meet up with an MI-6 team that will already be inside the building. They will switch the inhalers with counterfeit ones. By this time, Joe should be out of the building. You will then disable the explosives while the MI-6 team searches the rest of the lab’s main computer system.” Claire had been listening, nodding her understanding but couldn’t help an interruption. “Wait- you’re just going to steal their files?”

“This isn’t sanctioned research, ye ken? MI-6 wants to know what else Henschel is up to,” Jamie told her. “So, I get out with the switched inhalers. Joe tries to blow the charge . . .”

“And nothing happens,” Jamie finished for her. “By that time, security is on their way and we can’t get back in,” Claire said. “That’s the plan,” Jamie affirmed. It seemed straightforward enough, but Jamie could tell there was something else bothering her. “Are ye alright, Sassenach?” Claire smiled, always feeling slightly starved for the sound of that name on his lips. She hesitated only a moment,
then asked, “What do you know about Case 347-M? It was mentioned in Lamb’s personnel file, but there are obviously some pages missing.” She shouldn’t have been surprised that looking at Lamb’s file had raised more questions than it had answered. It was like looking at a jigsaw puzzle with several key pieces missing— the picture of her uncle was simply incomplete. She wondered if it would ever be otherwise. “And Agent Carter? I noticed that, too,” Jamie told her. “I went looking for the file, but it was missing from the archives. But I did find out something about Carter— he worked in counter-intelligence.”

“So why would a counter-intelligence agent have been working with my uncle?” Claire could feel a sense of dread growing within her. “He wouldn’t,” Jamie answered. She probably could have completed the thought for him if she could have found her voice. So, she let Jamie speak the thought she feared. “It likely means your uncle was suspected of selling secrets.” More questions. More lies. More layers. It brought Claire back to the fact that Jamie was probably the least complicated thing in her life. She longed to tell him, to lean her head on his shoulder, to sink into his embrace. But even that couldn’t be simple. They were in public and she had to keep pretending that they were just two people who happened to be filling up their cars at the same time. She did allow her eyes to meet his and hoped that he could see everything she could not say. “We still need to have that talk at some point,” she finally said. “I ken, Sassenach,” he said quietly in reply. “Dinna fash. I’m not going anywhere.” She smiled and turned to go. Giving him a thorough once-over, a look full of promise, while glancing back over her shoulder, she couldn’t help but get the last word. “Soon.”
That night in Bonn, in their all-black mission garb, Claire and Joe climbed down a ladder in a shaft leading to an access tunnel. Once they emerged from the tunnel, they headed for the main server room. Joe started to set the explosives while Claire found the alarm control panel. After pulling a few wires and splicing them together, the alarm started sounding throughout the building. Hopefully, finding the source of the alarm would keep security occupied while they completed their mission. Claire rose to her feet and said to Joe, “Ok, I’m going for the inhalers.” He looked up from the detonator he was rigging and said, “Right. Meet you outside in ten minutes.” Claire took off running for the lab, avoiding the security guards investigating the alarm. When she arrived, she grabbed several of the inhalers from their storage case, put them in her bag then doubled back towards the stairs. At the bottom of stairs, seemingly out of nowhere, the four-man MI-6 team materialized. Dressed in tactical gear, the man who was clearly their team leader approached Claire and said, “I believe you have something for us.” Claire nodded and pulled the inhalers out of her bag, while another agent pulled the same size dummy inhalers from his bag to switch them with hers. While the exchange was taking place, the team leader glanced at her and said, “So, you’re Beauchamp?”

“Yes,” Claire said with a slight hesitation in her voice. She didn’t know where this was leading, and she didn’t want her partner to start getting suspicious of why she was taking so long. “Fraser’s told me about you,” the agent said with a slight smile. “He likes you.”

“Yeah?” Claire couldn’t help the flush that came over her face. “He respects you.” That made Claire break into a full smile. She already knew that Jamie liked her (well, possibly more than liked her given their encounter in the storage warehouse), but the fact that he respected her work as an agent filled her with a profound sense of pride and joy. She didn’t have time to unpack all the reasons why it mattered to her so much just then, but she would. She needed to. First things first. “I’ve got a bomb to disengage,” she told the agents. “Yeah, we’d appreciate it,” the team leader told her with a grin. “We’ll be about ten more minutes. Good luck.” And with that, they went their separate ways. The MI-6 team headed off to do the rest of their intel gathering on the purpose and work of Henschel’s lab while Claire went back to disable the explosive Joe had planted.

Outside, Joe was getting nervous. It was taking Claire a long time to get out of the building and the alarm continued to sound. Had she been captured? Had something gone wrong while she was retrieving the inhalers? He was practically bouncing with nerves when she finally showed up. “Ok, we’re ready,” she told him. Joe pulled the detonator out of his bag, pulled up the antenna, and pushed the button to activate the explosives. Just as Claire anticipated, nothing happened. Joe tried the button a few more times but still nothing. “Joe, we have to get out of here,” Claire said, tugging on his sleeve and trying to get him to follow her. “Joe, come on, they’re coming,” she told him again. “Hold on,” he said, and reached into his bag again. “Remember what happened in Peru?” It took Claire a moment to recall the mission, but she remembered. And she realized what Joe was holding. It was a secondary detonator. She could do nothing but watch in frozen horror as Joe activated the detonator and sent the entire building up in a massive explosion- with the MI-6 team...
still inside. Claire could hear Joe calling for her to come with him, but it seemed as though his voice was coming from somewhere far away. She had failed; agents had died because of her. She couldn’t tear her eyes away, couldn’t tear her body away, her mouth was frozen open in an ‘o’ of horror. She tried to resist the nearly overwhelming urge to vomit as Joe practically dragged her to her feet to escape the approaching security guards. They ran through the woods with the security forces shooting at them from behind. Claire was ahead of Joe and could barely see where she was going through her tears and could hardly breathe through the sobs tearing out of her lungs. She dove and took cover behind a fallen tree while Joe hid on the opposite side of the trail from her a few feet ahead. She was trying to keep her sobbing as silent as possible but didn’t know how well she was succeeding. One of the guards came upon Joe’s position and he fought back. Claire knew she should get up, help him, so they could get back to the van. But she simply could not make herself get to her feet. Instead, she sat up, leaned back against the fallen tree, and allowed her partner to take on the guard himself.

“I couldn’t move. Joe had to drag me to my feet just to get to the van. And when he asked me what was wrong, why I had just . . . frozen, I made up something about having a flashback to Frank,” Claire told Jamie when they met in the storage warehouse after her return from Germany. Sitting on a wooden crate, she kept her head down and stared at the cold concrete floor. She could hardly bear to face him after what happened. Would he ever look at her the same again? Would she ever look at herself the same again? “Ye did everything ye could, Sassenach,” he said to her after a moment. That was not the response she was expecting, so she tried again to clarify. “I was supposed to stop the detonation. I didn’t. And because of that, four MI-6 agents were killed.” She could hardly get the words out and wondered if she could ever talk about it without bile rising in her throat. “You had no way of knowing Joe had a second trigger,” Jamie reminded her. “There was nothing you could do.”

“I could have told him the truth!” Claire said with a sudden surge of anger, rising to her feet. “Joe needs to know who he’s really working for.”

“Claire . . .” Jamie began, but she cut him off. “I know, I can’t put his family at risk.”

“Or yourself,” he said urgently. Jamie believed what Claire told him, that Joe was a good man and would never willingly be working for their enemy. But the simple truth was that if Claire told him the truth and she was wrong about him, he could kill her on the spot. And he simply couldn’t allow that possibility, no matter how slim. Claire wasn’t finished trying to convince him, though. She walked closer to him as she said, “I know all of that. But it’s the right thing to do. Those men died for no reason.”

“No, those men died for their country,” Jamie said emphatically. Jamie could not accept the idea that their deaths were in vain, and he could not allow her to feel that way either. She looked absolutely miserable and it was tearing his guts out. So, he did the only thing he could. He took her in his arms and simply held her. And just as he knew she would, she fit perfectly against him. With one hand on her back and the other on the glorious cloud of her hair, he said, “Claire, I’m sorry. I’m sorry you had to go through that.” He heard and felt her exhale on a shaky sob, but her body relaxed into his as she accepted the comfort he was offering. He couldn’t help but think about the kiss they’d shared the last time they were there, but now was not the time for that or for further conversation on their obvious attraction for each other and what it meant. There was nothing sexual about their embrace, though he could no more stop himself from responding to her than he could stop himself from breathing. He simply wanted to offer her solace, as he had on the bridge. He wanted to pour his strength into her. She carried so much on her shoulders. And before she went back out into the world again, he wanted to fill her with the soul-deep knowledge that she did not have to carry it
alone. After a few minutes, she pulled back and looked up at him with tears on her face, which he gently wiped away with his thumbs. But she managed a smile and he couldn’t help but return it. He wondered if there would ever come a time when he would stop being amazed by her strength, her fight, her determination. She was the most extraordinary woman he had ever met. And someday she would be his.

The next day, while Claire was sitting in her flat, her phone rang. When she answered, she heard the voice of a woman she did not recognize. “Who is this?” she asked the caller. “You called and left me a message, something about my husband having worked with your uncle? I am Agent Carter’s widow,” the woman told her. She felt dread and excitement shoot through her system in equal measures. This put her one step closer to finding out about the mysterious case in her uncle’s personnel file. She set up a meeting with Agent Carter’s widow for later that afternoon and drove to her house. Rose Carter was a lovely middle-aged woman with strawberry blonde hair and a pleasant demeanor who instantly made Claire feel at ease despite the potential landmine of their subject matter. They sat down in the comfortable arm chairs in Mrs. Carter’s living room with tea cups in hand and Claire decided it would be best just to dive right in. “I know that your husband worked in counter-intelligence. And I know that his job was to investigate MI-5 and MI-6 agents who were suspected of spying for other countries, especially Russia. My uncle was one of the agents your husband investigated- I know that much. Did your husband ever mention the name Lambert Beauchamp to you at all?” Mrs. Carter shrugged her shoulders and said, “I’m sorry. Bradley didn’t talk about his work.” Claire saw the picture on the mantel of a man with brown hair and soft brown eyes and smiled in spite her frustration. Directing her smile at Mrs. Carter, she said, “He looks kind.”

“Oh, he is,” Rose replied with a smile of her own. Claire couldn’t help her confusion. “I thought Bradley was dead,” she said, not wanting to bring up any painful subjects but looking for any answers she could get. “Oh, that’s not Bradley. That’s my boyfriend, Grant,” Mrs. Carter said with a small smirk, as if she felt slightly naughty admitting she had a boyfriend. Her face changed quickly as though she were thinking of something and she rose from her chair. Digging in a drawer in the cabinet behind Claire’s chair, she pulled out a picture frame and came over and handed it to Claire. “That’s Bradley. He wasn’t so nice.” Claire saw the picture on the mantel of a man with brown hair and soft brown eyes and smiled in spite her frustration. Directing her smile at Mrs. Carter, she said, “He looks kind.”

Claire raced back to her flat with her mind going even faster than her car. Through the door, down the hall to her bedroom, she grabbed a small box that contained the only connections she had to her life before her parents died. Pictures, souvenirs from family outings, even a few newspaper clippings. She put the box on her bed and started pulling out the contents, all of which she knew like the back of her own hand. There. A short newspaper article about a car accident her uncle was in when she was just three years old. It had always struck her as strange, even more so considering her parents had died in a car accident just two years later. Her uncle’s car had collided with another on a foggy night and the driver of the other car had died, while her uncle escaped with only minor injuries. Holding the newspaper clipping, she felt sick to her stomach. She dug into her purse and pulled out the photograph Rose Carter gave her. Bradley Carter was the man who died in Uncle Lamb’s car accident. And it was looking less like an accident by the minute.

Claire did the only thing she could think to do with the latest revelation about her uncle- she called Jamie. At the storage warehouse that night, she told him, “I never really thought much about what happened in my uncle’s accident. I was so young at the time and it got overshadowed by what happened with my parents later. But now I know that he was being chased, hunted by a counter-
intelligence officer who suspected him of working for our enemies. And that man wound up dead in an accident with my uncle in the other car. It keeps bringing me back to the same conclusion. If my uncle hadn’t been a double agent all those years ago, Agent Carter would still be alive.” She paused, trying to catch her breath and get her emotions back under control. She looked at him with her golden eyes full of tears and a thousand emotions she couldn’t name. “I’m so sorry to lay all this on you. I just have no one to talk to about this.”

“It’s alright, Sassenach.” He tried to pour everything he was feeling into his gaze as he looked back at her, to tell her without words that it was a privilege beyond price to be the recipient of her confidence. But he was snapped back to heavier things with her next words: “I want to report him.”

“What?”

“I want to turn him in,” Claire said, her voice full of conviction and something much deeper. Something that sounded a lot like loathing to Jamie’s ears. “For what? For being under suspicion over twenty years ago? The agency already knows that.”

“But what about the file you pulled for me? There were pages missing. Maybe it didn’t end back then. Maybe he’s still got divided loyalties.” Claire was pacing like a caged animal. The tension was rolling off her in waves. Jamie knew it was probably futile, but he felt like he had to try to stop the onslaught of her temper. “Ok stop. What matters, what’s important is taking down OB8. Lamb is helping us do that.”

“So, you’re suggesting, once again, that I do nothing.” She practically spit the words back at him. Jamie quietly wondered if he’d gone completely daft. But still, he charged on. “Not about this. We have too much work to do.”

“I wasn’t supposed to do anything about Joe, either. Let me ask you this: is anything ever UNACCEPTABLE to you?” Her voice reached a whole new decibel level, her face was flushed, her fists were clenched at her sides, her chest was heaving, and she was glaring at him like he was the source of all the difficulties in her life at that moment. He had never wanted anyone more. He took a step toward her like she was a magnet pulling him in and said, gently, “I understand that we’re talking about your uncle here and that if he was selling secrets or is selling secrets, that would be hard.”

“I would hope that would be hard on you, too,” she bit off. He took another step toward her, reached out a hand in a gesture of peace, compromise (and because he was going to touch her very soon). “Before you do anything, let me find out if he’s under suspicion, if he’s being tracked, aye? Just give me two days.” Claire seemed content with his idea and nodded. She also had a dawning realization in her eyes that he had gotten closer to her during her outburst and that he still had his hand extended between them. She looked at him with a slight tilt of her head and started worrying her bottom lip as she took a step closer to him, then another, until she reached his outstretched hand. Almost before she could register what was happening, she was in the circle of his arms and staring at his delicious mouth. It always happened when he touched her: that jolt of electricity, that feeling that there suddenly was a lack of air in the room, the narrowing of the world down to nothing more than him and her and the heated rush of blood and imagining what their bodies could do to each other. He touched his lips to hers, softly, gently, and as they breathed each other, all the world around them seemed to fade into the background. They were alone. She grasped his arm to keep herself upright and leaned into him as close as she could get and felt it still wasn’t enough. Would it ever be enough? “I want ye, Claire,” he breathed as he trailed back up to her ear. “I want ye so much I can scarcely breathe.” He pulled his head back from hers and gave a not-so-gentle tug to her hair to bring her eyes to his. It stung a little, but she loved it and the feeling of it shot straight down between her legs. “Will ye have me?”
He held her still and it seemed like the whole world had gone still with them as he waited for her answer. She felt like she would only ever have one answer to give him. “Yes. Yes, I’ll have you,” she breathed as he pulled her back towards his mouth.
Claire’s simple ‘yes’ was kerosene to the fire that had been simmering in Jamie’s blood since their first meeting in the MI-6 van. He wanted to give her tenderness, gentleness. To be able to ease her down into soft bedding and take the time to worship her body as she deserved. And he would. Someday. But the unique constraints of their current situation simply did not allow for it. So, if he could not savor, he would devour. And every cell in his body roared in a kind of primitive joy when she seemed determined to devour him in equal measure. In the blink of an eye, her shirt was over her head and on the floor, quickly followed by his suit jacket and her bra. Claire was interrupted in her attempts to remove his tie (she **adored** the way his body looked in his perfectly tailored work suits, but they were a complete nuisance to take off) by his mouth sweeping down her newly bared chest. He began pulling urgently on her nipple with his mouth and she threw her head back with a moan that seemed to echo off the walls. His hands were everywhere at once, trailing fire on her skin. *Skin.* She **needed** his skin, needed to feel it under her hands and mouth more than she needed to take her next breath. **“Jamie . . . I need . . .”** she panted, pulling at his tie and fumbling with his shirt buttons while his tongue was trailing back up from her breast to her neck. She finally managed to get the tie over his head and had a split second to ponder simply ripping the shirt from his body when he took a step back, unbuttoned the cuffs and the top two buttons, his eyes searing into hers. **Claire did the rest.** She was done waiting. She closed the short distance between them, yanked the shirt out from his pants and pulled it up and over his head. As soon as it cleared, they were diving back into each other’s mouths, and when there was no space between their bare chests, her softness pressed into his solid muscle, the feeling of it ripped groans from both their mouths.

While he was walking her back towards the wall, he unhooked her pants and shot his fingers past the lace of her panties. **“Oh my GOD! JAMIE!”** Claire shouted, and as her back hit the wall she used it as leverage to press forward even harder against the unbelievable magic of his fingers. She was so hot, so wet against his fingers that Jamie felt he was being burned alive. Like gold refined in fire, the firestorm of their passion for each other burned away any memory of another’s touch until there was only her, only him and what they brought to each other. Claire felt herself starting to come apart and was clawing at his belt and pants to free him. **“I need you NOW,”** she growled, and when she finally pushed his pants down and wrapped her hand around his cock it was his turn to shout. **“FUCK, Claire!”** he bellowed as he thrust up into her hand. Then, he shoved her pants and panties down past her knees and impaled her against the wall with one thrust. She was so close already that as soon as he entered her, she exploded, screaming her release and clutching around him so hard that he nearly lost himself immediately. He stilled for just a moment as her fingers dug into his shoulders, pulled up her leg around his hip and held it under her knee as he began to rock into her. **“God, you feel amazing,”** he breathed, and knew how completely inadequate a word it was to describe the feeling of being inside her. Claire was having a difficult time finding words herself. Truthfully, she was having a difficult time remembering her own name. She finally forced out the only word she could grab from the spinning vortex of her mind. **“More.”** It was somehow both a plea and a command.

He couldn’t help himself. He smirked. She was a greedy wee thing and he **loved it.** She pushed her
heel into the small of his back so he could grab her hips and slam into her, hard and fast. He simply couldn’t hold back. But he wanted her to come with him. So, he reached down between their bodies and started stroking her clit until she was chanting, “Oh God, yes, Jamie, yes, please, oh God, more, yes . . .” with every plunge of his cock and every stroke of his fingers until she reached the edge once again and he pushed into her as deeply as he could. The entire world exploded for both of them as he threw back his head and bellowed her name to the ceiling, spilling into her as she screamed and shook in his arms. Trying desperately to find air, their foreheads rested together and she dragged her finger across the fullness of his lips.

When they’d put themselves back together a bit, they sat on the floor against the wall, Claire held in the circle of Jamie’s arms. She didn’t want to leave. She never wanted to leave. But she knew she couldn’t draw any unwanted attention to their clandestine meetings, either, so she had to keep them short by necessity. “Claire, I need ye to know . . .” Jamie started, trailing off, as if he wanted to tell her something but couldn’t find a way to get the words out. She pulled her head back from its resting place on his chest so she could look into his eyes, suddenly nervous but wanting to encourage him to say whatever was on his mind. Was he regretting what had happened between them? She tried to stop the bubble of panic from welling up inside her and tried to give him an easy out if that was what he wanted. “I know. You’re my handler. I have no idea how many MI-6 regulations we’ve violated at this point. If you don’t want . . .”

“Well!” he shouted, then realized how forcefully he’d spoken and started again, more quietly. “No, it’s not that. At all. We just havena had a chance to talk much about what’s happening between us. But it isn’t usual, ye ken? When I touch ye, when I had ye just now . . . It’s not like anything else. Ever.” Claire knew he was right. A small part of her felt disloyal to Frank for it (and she didn’t even want to begin to think about the fact that Frank’s murder had set off the chain of events that led her directly to Jamie), but there it was. There was something inherently different about her connection to Jamie, that electricity she felt whenever they touched. The explosion of sensations she felt when his mouth met hers, when their bodies joined, was like nothing she’d ever experienced. “No. This isn’t usual. It’s different,” she told him, and couldn’t resist bringing her hand up to cup his cheek. A smile that warmed her like sunshine spread on his face and he brought his lips to hers for a gentle, soft kiss. “Dinna fash about MI-6, Sassenach. I am more than willing to deal with the consequences if the need arises. This is worth it to me. You are worth it to me. I need ye to ken that before ye go.” While he wasn’t ready to reveal all his heart to her yet, the tone of his voice pleaded with her to understand. The fact that he wanted her physically was abundantly obvious by now (in truth, he would likely be counting the minutes until he could have her again). But it was so much more than just sex, a slaking of his thirst. His very soul belonged to her now and would never belong to another as long as he drew breath. “I do know it, Jamie,” she told him, and the sparkle in her whiskey eyes proved the truth of her words. “I should go,” she whispered over his lips as they met hers again, a gentle but insistent dance of tongues and breath and hearts. Somehow, it would have to be enough to sustain them when the crush of the outside world came flooding back in.

When Claire walked into OB8 the next morning, Randall immediately fell into step beside her. “Excellent work in Germany, Claire. The inhalers are in analysis and the plant was destroyed with no casualties.” Claire felt bile rise in her throat. No casualties. It took nearly all her strength to choke out a response. “Thank you, but Joe deserves the credit, not me.” He accompanied her into the briefing room where her emotions took another hit- her Uncle Lamb was sitting at the conference table. Sitting through briefings with Randall was already difficult enough. Now, with her suspicions about Lamb being a traitor, she couldn’t decide if she would rather run screaming from the room or simply kill them both. When she sat, she gripped the arms of her chair as if that alone would keep her still and quiet. “As of today, Lamb will be working with us here at Credit Guépard so he can more actively participate in the planning and execution of missions,” Randall said when everyone
had settled. The volume of Claire’s internal screaming went up by several decibels. Clearly, she
should have called in sick today and just stayed in bed. ‘I wish I could have stayed in bed . . . with
Jamie,’ she thought to herself, and then quickly clamped down on the parade of wildly inappropriate
images marching through her head. Her uncle had started talking by then and she tried to tune back
into what he was saying. “Two months ago, ITO vacated their forward base at Riyadh and several
other facilities without any warning. After we found out about it, we had our teams conduct sweeps
of the facilities. They came up with this.” Ned held up a greeting card in his hand. When he
opened it, it started playing music. He handed it to Claire and Joe asked, “Is the ink encoded?”

“That was my first thought,” Ned replied. “But after analysis, we found that the music itself actually
has a number pattern imbedded in the higher frequencies.”

“Have we deciphered the code?” Claire asked. “No,” Randall said as he clicked on the video
monitors and they saw a black and white photo of a small ship. “ITO was using this boat as a
floating lab. Last night one of our raid teams stormed the ship while it was passing through the
Panama Canal. They sent us this.” He clicked the remote again and pulled up a set of schematic
drawings. “This is ITO’s latest coding machine,” Lamb said. “Without it, we can’t decipher any of
their communications, including the music from the card.”

“How does it work?” Joe asked. “We don’t know yet. Unfortunately, the ship was equipped with a
self-destruct mechanism. Needless to say, the team left fairly quickly,” Randall said. “From what
we’ve gathered, only eight of these coding machines have been produced,” Lamb continued. “One
of them is currently in the possession of this man.” Lamb brought up the man’s picture from his
workstation and it appeared on all the monitors in the room. “John Snead,” Randall said. “He’s the
owner of an art gallery in New York City and happens to be an ITO operative. The coding machine
he has is currently being held at the gallery awaiting pickup. You leave tonight,” he said as he stood
and handed them the folders containing all of their identity details and mission specs. “We want to
find out where ITO has relocated and what they’re up to now. We also want you to bring back the
coding machine,” Lamb told them. Soon after, the briefing ended, and Claire was up and out of the
room like lightning. A few steps out of the room, Lamb caught up to her. Speaking in low tones, he
said, “I heard about what happened in Germany, it’s tragic. Are you alright?”

“Stop it,” Claire bit out, her anger boiling. “I know about you. I know about Agent Carter, about
the accident. Every time I think I know how awful you really are, I find out something worse. But
this time, I’m going to make sure you pay.” She took advantage of his stunned silence to turn and
board the elevator. He still hadn’t said a word in response by the time the doors closed.

Jamie was already hitting golf balls at the local driving range when Claire took the mat across from
him with her bucket of golf balls and her clubs. Since Jamie was left-handed, they could face each
other and talk without anyone being the wiser about their real purpose for being there. Jamie
couldn’t help a slight twinge of regret that he wouldn’t get to feast his eyes on her lovely round arse
held snugly in her wee golf shorts. He set a small white box on the low barrier between their mats
and Claire picked it up. She opened it and saw it contained what looked like a live beetle and she
nearly jumped out of her skin. “What’s this?” she asked him. “A bug,” Jamie told her simply.
“What are you, twelve years old?” she said sarcastically. “No, a bug, Sassenach. A listening
device,” he said with a smile and took another swing of his club. He continued, “MI-6 didn’t know
about Snead.”

“After we grab the coding machine, they’re going to scan for listening devices,” Claire told him,
watching her last shot sail through the air. “It’s alright,” he assured her. “The technology in this is
totally passive. The MI-6 engineers got the design from a Russian bug we found in our embassy
there. It’s completely undetectable.”
“And if they find it, they’ll just think it’s a bug,” she smiled. “Exactly,” Jamie said as he lined up his next shot. “What about the coding machine?” Claire asked him. She was trying really hard not to watch the way his muscles moved during his swing, but she was so distracted she nearly missed her next shot completely. Jamie, fortunately, hadn’t noticed. He told her, “We won’t have time to make a switch, so you’ll have to deliver the coding machine to OB8. When they break the code, they’ll inform their affiliate offices through their computer network. Thanks to you, we’re still downloading data off their mainframe.”

“How much have you gotten so far?” Claire wondered out loud. Anything that would lead to OB8 being destroyed faster was of vital interest to her sanity. “Almost two percent,” Jamie said during his next swing. Claire couldn’t hide her disappointment. “That’s all?”

“We can’t take too much too fast,” Jamie reminded her. “If we’re patient, we can eventually get all their internal files and then we can do some real damage.” Claire smiled broadly at that and they allowed their eyes to rest on each other for a moment before they went back to their golf shots. “I checked on yer uncle. He’s clean. No internal investigations.”

“I told him everything,” Claire said simply. “What? I asked you not to say anything,” Jamie huffed in frustration, raking his hands through his hair. Although Claire desperately wanted to have her fingers in his hair, her frustration flared right along with her desire. “I’m sorry, but at that moment I didn’t care. If you’d been in my position, you probably wouldn’t have been able to control yourself either.”

“Yer just going to have to learn how to do that,” Jamie said, and Claire immediately snapped back, “Don’t lecture me about my uncle. I know there are casualties in our line of work, but this one is too close to home for me. You can’t possibly understand what this is like.”

Jamie took a deep breath. He didn’t want to bring out his own demons, but it was the only way he could think of to get through to her. And since he loved her, he knew he would have told her eventually anyway. “At MI-6 Headquarters in London there is a memorial. It’s a memorial with no names- just a simple gold star carved in the wall for each officer the agency has lost in the line of duty. I was eight years old when my da became one of those stars.” Claire’s eyes went wide, and her mouth dropped open. And inside, she cursed OB8 a million times over that she couldn’t simply go to him and take him in her arms the way she so urgently wanted. “At the funerals, there is a protocol the agency representative has to follow,” he continued. “They are admonished- that’s the actual word in the manual- admonished not to be conspicuously emotional. The families are never given any details of how they died. My ma never recovered from it. She was a shell of herself the rest of her life.”

“Jamie. I’m so sorry.” She had never felt that word to be more inadequate, and she thought she’d felt it, the hollowness of it, down to her very core after Frank died. “I didn’t know.”

“The agents that died at Bonn? I’ve been assigned to represent the agency at their funerals,” he said, and she had never heard such weariness in his voice. She knew she had to go get ready for her trip to New York, but she couldn’t just walk away from him with the weight of what he’d just shared with her pressing down on her chest. They finished hitting their golf balls in silence, but Jamie felt what she was trying to do. The simple fact of her presence was a balm to his soul. So, she stayed. And when she finally had to walk away or miss her flight, she deliberately walked past his mat even though it was in the opposite direction of the exit and brushed her fingers against his arm. Later, when they were able to meet in private again, she would be able to offer him the comfort they both longed for.
Joe and Claire were standing in the middle of Snead’s art gallery in New York. “You ready?” she said into his ear. Instead of answering, Joe simply smiled at her and pulled a cigar out of his pocket. She smiled back as she turned to walk towards the back corner of the room, where the security guard was positioned at the entrance to the hallway that led to the offices. By the time she got there, Joe had lit the cigar and was calmly puffing away, causing the security guard to instantly move in his direction. The gallery manager also moved in Joe’s direction as Claire, in a long, pin-straight black wig and an extremely short lime green dress, snuck off down the now unguarded hallway. Claire went over the plan in her mind as she moved down the hall- Joe was posing as a wealthy buyer and would express interest in buying the entire collection. This would get Snead out of his office for face-to-face negotiations so Claire could get in, crack the safe, get the coding machine, and plant the bug. Easy. In theory. When she reached Snead’s office, she hid around the corner from the door. It didn’t take long for him to emerge and head toward the gallery’s main room where she knew Joe would be doing his best haggling to buy her time. As Snead walked away from his office, Claire threw her purse along the floor behind him to catch the door before it closed. But as soon as she got inside, the alarm panel on the wall started to beep. It was motion-activated; the full alarm would sound in 15 seconds unless she acted. She looked around and saw Snead’s hat on a coat rack in the corner. She grabbed the hat, tossed it over the motion sensor, and the alarm went silent.

Next, she pulled out the special glasses Ned made for her and put them on. As she turned a pirouette in the middle of the room, she spotted the secret panel in the wall where the safe was hidden. She went to the panel and knelt in front of it. She couldn’t slide it open, but when she pushed the outside with her fingers, the hidden latch released, and it swung open to reveal the safe. Ned had also given her a safe-cracking tool disguised as a watch; she held it up next to the combination dial and got to work. She had the safe open in under a minute. So far, so good, she thought. The coding machine was easy to spot from the schematics she’d seen in the briefing. She grabbed it and dropped it in her purse, then put the safe back the way it was when she’d entered the room. Finally, she planted the bug she’d gotten from Jamie in what she hoped was an inconspicuous spot. She was about to breathe a huge sigh of relief and head for the door when Snead’s hat fell from the motion sensor, triggering the alarm. She ran out the door and was heading down the hall when she heard a security guard coming her way, so she turned and went back toward Snead’s office. The hallway was a dead end. There were no other exits. She was cornered. As she looked around, she realized that her only way out was up. She climbed the slats cut into the wall and onto the exposed piping running along the ceiling. The security guard walked right under her and stood at the doorway to Snead’s office, looking for the right key on his keyring. Almost immediately, Claire realized she had a much bigger problem than the security guard as her body began to get uncomfortably hot. She was laying on a hot water pipe. She pushed herself into a push-up position to try to get as much of her body off the pipe as possible, but her hands were scorching. The security guard was still fumbling with his keys and Claire didn’t know how much longer she could hold on. He finally pushed the door open, but Claire’s shoe clipped the pipe as she was moving, and the guard turned back into the hallway toward the noise with his gun drawn. She had no choice but to hold herself up like a gymnast over the smaller pipe at her waist as the guard swept the hallway. Her arms were shaking by the time he
finally returned to Snead’s office and the door closed behind him. Claire swung down from the pipe and ran back down the hallway to join Joe in the gallery, still puffing away on his cigar. “Dahling,” she said in her thickly fake accent as she grabbed his arm, “I think I prefer the Lamborghini.” He looked at Snead, shrugged, then smiled at her indulgently. “You are the birthday girl,” he said. “Oh, could you take care of this for me?” Joe asked Snead as he handed him his cigar. Then he and Claire turned and walked arm-in-arm out of the gallery.

“We sent the coding machine you recovered from Snead’s gallery in New York to analysis,” Randall told them in the briefing room after they returned from New York. “And we were able to determine how it works.”

“Here, put your thumb on the pad in the middle,” Ned said to Claire as he handed her the coding machine. She did and felt the smallest of pinches. “What just happened?” she asked.

“The machine took a sample of your DNA,” Ned told her. “And now it can build a code based on your DNA. It’s genius.”

“That’s how the code in the greeting cards was created- the encryption was DNA-based,” Randall continued. Claire wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer to the next question but knew it had to be asked anyway. “Whose DNA?”

“We know that one of the cards was received by this man, Garrett Plishkov, leader of the ITO station in Riyadh,” Lamb said, pointing to the face of the man on the video monitor. “The problem is that Plishkov is dead and we don’t know where he’s buried. We need his DNA in order to break the code in the greeting cards.”

Randall turned to her and said, “Plishkov was killed by Michael Shepton, a contract killer. He’s been through extensive mental conditioning- a programmed assassin. If you say a specific key phrase to him, you can get him to do anything you ask, and he will have no conscious memory of it after the fact. He is currently in an asylum in Prague. Your mission is to go there, say the trigger poem to Shepton, and get him to tell you where Plishkov is buried. Agent MacLeary will accompany you, posing as a private physician. You will be his patient getting admitted to the asylum for treatment.” Everything about the mission made Claire uneasy. But at least she wouldn’t be alone. There was nothing for it. She would have to swallow her discomfort to do the job. After her dismissal from the briefing, she left the Credit Guépard building so she could go home to pack for her trip to Prague. She heard Lamb call her name and turned to see him coming down the sidewalk after her. She paused for only a moment before she turned and started to walk again. There was nothing he had to say she needed to hear. “Claire, wait!” he said and reached out to grab her arm.

“You don’t have clearance. There are rules . . .” he started, before she cut him off once again. “Then you break them,” she forced out through her gritted teeth. He raised his eyebrows at her and
gave a small shake of his head. “Think about what happened the last time you had such a cavalier attitude about following rules. I’m not perfect. I’ve never claimed to be. But I am smart enough not to draw simple conclusions and act on them. I would think that if anyone would have learned that lesson it would be you.” This time, it was Lamb who turned and walked away, leaving Claire staring after him with even more unanswered questions.

The weather was beautiful, but it almost seemed a mockery to the solemn occasion of a funeral. Jamie stood off to the side at the grave site where there were chairs filled with mourners dressed in black facing a flag-draped casket. This was the first funeral of the five he had to attend on behalf of MI-6 for the agents killed on Claire’s mission in Bonn. And the agent they were burying today left behind a wife and a young son, only 6 years old. He barely heard the words of the minister conducting the service. He couldn’t stop looking at the boy who had lost his father and remembering how it felt to be in a chair just like that looking at a casket just like that. He remembered how hard he’d fought to keep his tears from showing, to be strong for his mam and Jenny. He remembered the blankness on his mam’s face, the total lack of feeling as if her heart had already gone to rest with the man being lowered into the ground. He remembered feeling so cold inside and wondering if he would ever feel warm again. The crack of the gun salute snapped him out of his painful memories and back to the reality of the moment. He went to take the folded flag and handed it to the agent’s widow, just as protocol directed. But he couldn’t leave it at that. He simply couldn’t, no matter what the manual said. He knelt in front of the small boy with tears streaming down his face, placed his hand on his knee, and said simply, “Yer da was a hero.” The boy stared at him for a beat, saying nothing, then suddenly pitched himself forward into Jamie’s arms. And he simply held on, stroking the soft blonde hair as the boy wept and shook in his arms. Even if it was a breach of protocol, Jamie knew he was exactly where he should be.

When the funeral ended, Jamie headed straight for Lallybroch. It had been a while since he’d seen Jenny and he needed the comfort of family to hold him through the rest of the gauntlet he still faced. Even worse, he hadn’t seen Claire before she left on her next mission and he was churning with need and worry. As he came through the door, he slid out of his suit jacket and listened to the cacophony of chaos and noise that always accompanied his nieces and nephews. It was music to his ears. As Young Ian came charging past him with a play sword in hand, he skidded to a halt and shouted, “UNCA JAMIE!!” As he hoisted the rapidly growing boy into his arms, he was soon surrounded by all of Young Ian’s older siblings: “Wee” Jamie, who at 10 was not-so-wee anymore; 8-year-old Maggie, his oldest niece; then the twins Michael and Janet, who had just turned 6. Young Ian, who had been a bit of a surprise to his parents but had rounded out their family perfectly, was a delightful and precocious 3 and a half (the half was very important to mention). In no time he had children attached like barnacles to every one of his limbs and he was being regaled with stories of the new girl at school Jamie had a crush on, Maggie’s favorite new singer, Michael and Janet’s first kindergarten field trip, and Young Ian’s improved sword-fighting skills. Then, in walked the undisputed ruler of the house, all five feet of her. “Och, are the lot of ye plannin’ to let yer poor uncle breathe, then? Get outside, all of ye. But dinna be strayin’ too far from the house. It’ll be dinner time before ye know it.” A chorus of “Yes, mam” went up as the children scattered out to the grounds of their family estate, leaving Jenny and Jamie alone. “Ye had a funeral today, aye?” she asked him, even though she already knew the answer. Even if Ian wasn’t Jamie’s partner, she would have seen it in his face. “Aye,” he said quietly, and she led him into the parlor to pour him a whiskey. Once they were settled, the whole story came pouring out of him, and she couldn’t help but hold her fist to her mouth when he told of reaching out to comfort the young boy. As hard as it was for him, Jenny couldn’t help but be glad he had been there. They knew better than most how important human connection was when it felt like the bottom had dropped out of your world. But even as he continued to nurse his whiskey after the telling ended and they had fallen into silence, she sensed
there was more to his brooding than just the funerals. So, she decided to take a shot in the dark. “Ye’re not just thinkin’ about Da, are ye? If I didna ken any better, brother, I’d say there was a woman occupyin’ yer mind.”

Jamie could conceal his emotions quite easily under most circumstances, but the accuracy of his sister’s observation had his eyes going wide and flying to her face. Was he really that obvious? Or did his sister just know him that well? Either way, he was suddenly overcome with the need, in at least some small way, to bring his feelings for Claire into the light. “Ye canna say a word to anyone, Jenny. Not even Ian.” It was Jenny’s turn to have her eyes widen, as Jamie knew she and Ian had no secrets between them, but she understood immediately when he continued, “I ken he has suspicions already. But I dinna want to put him in a bad position at work, ye ken? She’s . . . she’s an asset. My asset. And I ken that it’s wrong and it breaks about a thousand rules and that there are people who would kill us if they ever found out,” he said as Jenny flinched. She needed no reminder of the dangers her husband and brother faced. She lived with the reality of those dangers every day. But everything inside of her went soft as he went on and she saw the light in his eyes and the smile on his face. “She’s the one, Jen. Da always told me I’d know the right woman when I found her, and he was right. She’s it for me.”

God it feels good to say it, Jamie thought to himself. Jenny took a deep breath and said, “Weel, ye never were one for rules, were ye, brother? Dinna fash. Ye’ll find a way to make it work. Ye’re far too stubborn not to, ye ken? And ye best be bringin’ her here the second ye do, aye?” She stood from her chair and clasped his hand with a loving squeeze. Then she headed towards the kitchen and called back over her shoulder, “Ye’ll stay for dinner, aye? I dinna want to ken how many nights ye’ve had takeout this week.” Jamie shook his head with a smile and then went to round up his nieces and nephews for dinner. His trip home had been just the balm his soul needed.

Ned stared at the monitor in his work area, frozen with panic. He’d been running his usual diagnostic of the network and things had seemed a little slow, but the data was undeniable. He knew exactly what he was looking at; he just didn’t want to believe it was possible. How could he have missed the signs? “No,” he said quietly to himself. “Oh, no, no, no, NO!” He was up and out of his chair and hurtling out of the room. He threw open the door to the main server room and in seconds, he had the entire system shut down. He collapsed against the wall and panted with exertion and with the dread of the conversation he was about to have with Jonathan Randall. They’d been hacked and had been bleeding data. Ten minutes later, Randall picked up the phone in his office and dialed a familiar but rarely used number. “Alan? It’s Jonathan Randall. I think we have a mole.”

Claire was in a wheelchair. She was trying her best to disappear into her role as she usually did when she went on missions, but she couldn’t quite get there. No one else would notice, but she felt her disquiet all the way down to her bones. Something just didn’t feel right about this place, this mission. She caught a glimpse of Shepton on her way to her room (more like a cell from the looks of it) while Agent MacLeary spun their cover story behind her and left with the head of the facility to get her formally admitted. Later, when she was escorted to the common room for mealtime, she made her way over to Shepton’s table. “No man is an island,” she began in a low voice, speaking the words of Shepton’s trigger poem slowly and clearly. She had barely begun her recitation when Shepton leapt from his chair and grabbed her around the throat. He was nearly growling at her as she struggled for air. “Who are you? What do you want with me?” The orderlies rushed over to separate the two of them, shocking Shepton with their electric wands as Claire’s vision began to swim from the lack of air. They finally pulled him away as Claire sputtered and coughed. Shepton broke free and tried to come at her again and the orderlies shocked him a second time and dragged
him away. When an orderly approached Claire, she was expecting assistance. Instead, he grabbed her by the arm and whispered in her ear, “We know who you are, Miss Beauchamp.” Claire wrenched her arm away, punched him in the face, and ran.

Ian was walking through the hallway of the MI-6 office when he spotted Rupert, who looked like he was in a hurry. Before he had the chance to launch into a discussion on the latest happenings in the rugby league they both followed, Rupert blurted out, “Where’s Jamie?”

“He’s still covering the funerals for the agents who were killed at Bonn,” Ian replied, shaking his head. He knew how big of a toll that duty was taking on his brother-in-law and best friend, a feeling that had only been further reinforced when he’d seen Jamie at Lallybroch for dinner the day before. Jenny hadn’t filled him in on all the details of the conversation she’d had with her brother before his arrival home, but he could feel the currents swirling around him. Rupert pulled him out of his line of thought when he continued, “Ye ken that asylum Beauchamp’s been sent to? We just found out that the director is with S Branch.” Ian could do nothing but stare at him in horror. As he rushed off down the hall with Rupert, he wondered to himself just how much more bad news Jamie could possibly handle.

Claire had been recaptured by the orderlies almost immediately and placed in a straitjacket, but she fought back once again and took off running through the halls of the asylum. Her cover was blown and all she could think to do was find MacLeary and get out, fast. She ducked into a room as her pursuers ran past her and used a jagged piece of metal on the wall to pry her way out of the straitjacket. As she stood and caught her breath, she had a momentary flash of relief when she realized she was in the director’s office. And MacLeary was there, sitting in a chair facing the desk. But her relief was soon swamped by an overwhelming feeling of dread. He wasn’t moving. And as she put one foot in front of the other and approached him, she tried to tell herself she wasn’t going to find what she thought when she got to him. When she finally reached him after what seemed like an hour of walking, she placed her hand on his shoulder and spun him around- and lost her breath for the second time that day when she saw that his throat had been slit from ear to ear. She was trapped. She was alone. And they knew who she was.
Claire is in a whole mess of trouble, isn't she? Well then, I think it's time for the men in her life to meet! (I had SO MUCH FUN writing them together- hope you enjoy!)

Get away. Get away. Get away. It was the only thought in her head as soon as she saw MacLeary's body, repeating over and over like a litany. So, she ran. Again. But as soon as she burst out into the hallway again at a full sprint, there was a guard coming behind her, shouting after her in Czech. She ran through a door at the end of the hall, barely registering the contents of the room. The only thing she was looking for was a possible exit. There was a door at the other end of the room. Locked. A small window on one wall. Also locked. While sorting through her possible options, her pursuer burst through the door, electric wand in hand. There was some sort of table in the middle of the room, which she tried to keep between herself and the guard. Feinting back and forth, they finally came together in combat. Claire managed to kick the wand from his hand, and after she spun him around, she grabbed at the key card attached to his belt, stretched the wire long, and wrapped it around his neck. She heard the door open again and spun the guard in her grasp around, using him as a shield against the incoming threat. The second guard fired his tranquilizer gun a second too late, hitting his colleague instead of Claire. But while her back was turned, she suddenly felt a thump in the middle of her back, and she let out a small grunt of surprise and pain. Everything began moving in slow motion and as she turned, she saw the director with his tranquilizer gun still pointed at the midsection of her body. Her last thought as she began to sink slowly to the ground was to wonder what kind of torment awaited her when she woke up.

Lamb sat in one of the comfortable chairs in Jonathan Randall’s office. Never one to beat around the bush, Randall got right to the point of his summons. “Claire and MacLeary missed their scheduled contact. I just thought you should know,” Randall said simply. Lamb kept his face passive even though his insides were churning. Logic told him there could be any number of reasons for the breach of mission protocol, but his gut told him Claire was in trouble. Randall seemed to know that no response was forthcoming, so he continued, “She’s smart. She’s strong. And we’ve seen her through worse than this.”

“Perhaps not,” Lamb said simply, continuing to play poker with Randall, not wanting to give him an inch. “Perhaps not,” Randall echoed back to him, “but I believe in her. I believe in her as if she were my own flesh and blood.” Lamb’s control slipped a bit at that, his eyes widening at the audacity of that statement. Pausing a moment, enjoying the game, Randall straightened and walked to the other side of his desk. “Anyway, their next scheduled contact is in ten hours. Then we should have a better idea of just how hot the water really is.”

At that very moment in Prague, Claire woke up sputtering, her mind instantly registering that she was both completely soaked and totally restrained. The table, she thought to herself. It wasn’t really a table at all. It was a tank. She was lying on her back in a tank of water. There were electrodes attached to her body and she had leather cuffs around her wrists that held her securely to the table.
The director was sitting next to her smoking a cigarette and there was another man seated behind her in charge of the controls. “Let us not waste time,” the director began, holding his smoldering cigarette between his fingers, his accent thick but his voice steady and calm. “I know you work for OB8. I know you are here to find out where Shepton buried Plishkov’s body, that you need Plishkov’s DNA to read ITO code. What I do not know is whether you have succeeded.” Claire still felt the dim, fuzzy feeling from the tranquilizer, but shook it off and responded, “Since we’re not playing games- which is refreshing- I’d like to know who’s asking.” She couldn’t seem to stop herself from shaking and she was nearly gasping for breath, her body responding automatically to the threat her mind knew was imminent. Sure enough, the director responded with a glance to the other man in the room. Claire heard the clicking of a dial behind her and the whizzing sound of electric current running, pooling, waiting to be released. He said, “My affiliation is unimportant. You have until the machine charges to answer my question.”

“Wait. This can’t be the best version of this conversation,” Claire began, desperately trying to stall for more time or convince her captors to change venues. “Look,” she said, louder, her voice rising with her fear, “Shepton didn’t talk. I don’t know where Plishkov’s body is buried.” The director looked bored, as if he wasn’t even registering her words. Faster, louder still, Claire pleaded, “Wait, I’m telling you I don’t know anything . . .” With a single nod from the director, the guard behind her flipped the switch. Claire’s body twitched and shook violently as the electricity coursed through her and she cried out in excruciating pain until once again the world went black.

At an out-of-the-way Chinese restaurant in Inverness, Lamb walked in during the lunch rush and was instantly recognized by the host, who informed him that his usual table was waiting for him. Following the man to the back of the crowded main room, he was led into a private dining room with one round table and two chairs. But when he entered, instead of seeing one of his usual MI-6 contacts, he saw a man he had never seen before. The man was seated at the table, holding a teacup in his left hand and tapping a rhythm on his leg with his right, a sure sign of his agitation. Lamb waited for the host to leave, lingering inside the door as the tall, red-haired man rose from his seat at the table and headed toward him, presumably to shake his hand. “Mr. Beauchamp, I’m sorry about the . . .” Jamie began, but before he could say another word Lamb twisted his arm behind his back, pushed him face-first into the wall, and drew his gun. Jamie was stunned by the older man’s strength and fleetingly thought that this was not how he envisioned his first meeting with the only living relative of the woman he loved. Lamb pressed the barrel of his gun against the back of his head and simply said, low and harsh, “Who are you?”

“I’m MI-6 Operations Officer Fraser- I’m Claire’s handler,” Jamie grunted out as well as he could manage given that he was close to eating the paint off the wall. He walked me through yer SOP. We’re safe.” To Jamie’s relief, this answer seemed to satisfy Lamb, as he slowly lowered his gun and released Jamie from his hold. As he turned to face Claire’s uncle, Lamb asked him, “Are Claire and I switching handlers or is this a special occasion?”

“No. We have a problem,” Jamie said as both men took their seats at the table, a cautious detente between them for the moment. “MacLeary hasn’t made contact. I know,” Lamb responded with a hint of annoyance in his voice. Jamie had to fight through a nearly overwhelming rush of panic to respond, “No. We believe S Branch had an agent waiting for them in the hospital.” As soon as Jamie had returned to the office after the last funeral and saw Ian and Rupert’s faces, he knew something had gone terribly wrong. But he had been completely blindsided by the news that Claire had unwittingly walked into a trap on her mission in Prague. He could never rest easy when she was in the field. He knew the dangers she faced, knew that eventually something like this was bound to happen to someone who put themselves on the line as often as she did. As scared as he thought he’d been when he heard she’d nearly died while dismantling the nuclear bomb in Virginia, that seemed
mere child’s play in comparison to the wave of terror he was feeling now. He had hardly known her then, even though his heart had already fallen at her feet. But now he knew the softness of her lips, the silky smoothness of her skin, the wee noises she made when he took her, the feel of her tight heat when she exploded around him. And knowing all of that, he knew that he could not have a life without it- he would merely have a shell of an existence, just as his mother had after his father’s death. He sank into the nearest chair as his legs turned to water beneath him and held his head in his hands. It was the not knowing that was torturing him. Even as he raked his fingers through his hair and tuned back into the discussion of what their options were, he had no idea if she was alive or dead. Finally, in consultation with Munro, he had contacted Lamb. He had barely eaten or slept, his world reduced to the singular purpose of getting Claire returned to him alive, safe, and whole, no matter the cost. A look of concern had crossed Lamb’s face with Jamie’s news, and he paused before responding. “OB8 does not have confirmation of that.”

“MI-6 does,” Jamie said in clipped tones. “We have an extraction team waiting on the ready line. I want to pull Claire out of there.” There was a protracted period of silence as the two men looked at each other across the table. Jamie held Lamb’s gaze but had started drumming his fingers on his leg again. Eventually he felt like he had to break the silence. “I was hoping we could coordinate this together.”

Lamb poured himself a cup of tea and said, his voice full of mocking, “Mr. Fraser, you’re young, and you’re eager, and I understand that. One thing you’re not- and this is something only time can provide, really- is wise.”

“Ye don’t think this is the right move,” Jamie said. It was a statement, not a question. His eyebrows had gone up at Lamb’s words but otherwise he remained expressionless. He took a sip of his tea and waited, knowing the older man would have more to say. He didn’t have to wait long. “Listen carefully, Mr. Fraser. Even with a minimal extraction team you can’t guarantee containment. And if Randall finds out, Claire is as good as dead anyway.” Although he couldn’t have known it, there was no quicker way for Lamb to push Jamie’s buttons than to mention ‘Claire’ and ‘dead’ in the same sentence. His voice rising, Jamie said, “Then retire her early. Pull her out of service.”

“And in the process expose your operation at OB8 . . .”

“Claire’s life is worth the risk!” Jamie shouted, absolutely at the end of his tether.

“NOT TO CLAIRE,” Lamb shouted, then paused. Continuing in a lower tone, he said, “Taking them down is what gets her up in the morning. Or . . . did you think it was those meetings she has with you?”

“What is your problem with me?” Jamie demanded, fuming. He knew that Claire’s uncle had no idea just what was happening in those meetings (Thank Christ, Jamie thought to himself), but he couldn’t deny that the words still stung- and caused a tiny seed of doubt. Maybe he was reading too much into what was happening between them. Dragging himself back into the moment, he heard Lamb say, “You pulled my file last week. That’s my problem, Mr. Fraser. Now did curiosity get the better of you or were you trying to impress my niece?” Jamie sighed. He had a feeling that the source of Lamb’s hostility went beyond the situation with Claire’s mission and now everything was on the table. He decided to be as forthright as possible- he was done taking Lambert Beauchamp’s insults. “She thinks ye were selling secrets to Russia. But I’m sure ye already knew that. So, what I’m wondering is what were you doing checking up on me checking up on you?” Lamb simply smiled and said, “This meeting is over.” He pushed back his chair, stood, and walked out of the room without another word or a backward glance. Jamie stayed at the table for a few minutes longer to collect himself, then rose and left to head back to the office. More strategizing. More scenarios. Jamie vowed to himself that someone was going to have to physically throw him out of the office if
they wanted him to leave before they got some answers about what was happening to Claire.

Weak and in agonizing pain, Claire vaguely heard the director and the guard speaking to each other. They weren’t speaking English, and although she would have probably been able to translate under normal circumstances, it sounded like gibberish to her. Finally, they switched to English and she heard the director say very clearly, “Shepton told her nothing. She would have talked by now. Kill her.” As he turned and walked away to leave her to her fate, Claire roused herself enough to call after him, “You can’t torture Shepton for information.” This seemed to catch his attention- he turned back around as she continued slowly, “Electroshock won’t work. They programmed him to forget everything he did. That’s why you’re here posing as a psychiatrist. You’re S Branch, aren’t you?”

“What makes you think I work for S Branch?”

“Your accent is Latvian. Latvia is former Soviet Union, their main recruiting ground. Shepton thinks I’m a patient. He’s more likely to trust me than you.”

“Except he has already attacked you.” Claire had no idea how he knew that, but she knew she was negotiating for her life, so she continued, “Which I can use to seal his transference by bringing his guilt to the surface and then forgiving him.” He considered this for a moment, then said, “I suppose you’d like your life in exchange.” A glimmer of hope. He was willing to negotiate. She might actually get to leave this room alive. He continued, “If you get Shepton to recall the location of Plishkov’s body, you might just live out your life in a Siberian internment camp. You have until lockdown tonight.” Even though it seemed a nearly impossible task in an impossibly short period of time, Claire couldn’t help but take a huge exhale in relief as the guard unhooked the cuffs around her wrists.

A short time later, Claire was escorted into the common room. She noticed Shepton in a small courtyard-type area outside the window tending plants. As focused as she was on staying alive, she couldn’t help but feel a small sense of kinship with anyone who loved plants as she did. Slowly, as every part of her body was still tender and aching, she climbed out the window and approached him. She didn’t even think he had seen her yet when she heard him say, “Stay away from me.”

“I’m here to help you,” she began gently. He started shaking his head like a metronome, back and forth, back and forth. “I don’t want your help,” he said, still shaking his head. “I’m not open to your help.”

“I think I know what’s happening to you,” Claire began again. She knew she was walking on a tightrope. She had to get him to trust her, to open up to her, but she couldn’t force anything, or she would risk him shutting down. Or worse. He turned to face her finally and said, “I’m sure you do because you’re one of them. You know the words going through my head. I know I’ve seen you somewhere before, I’ve seen you . . .” he trailed off, pressing his hand to his temple as if trying to remember. Claire was shaken by the fact that he thought he recognized her even though she couldn’t imagine how it could possibly be true. So, she tried to reassure him again. “No, you haven’t,” she told him, but he was almost mumbling to himself, “I thought I was safe here,” over and over. She came around so she could make direct eye contact with him and told him, “What I’m about to say to you is the truth, so you have to listen to me.”

“NO!” he shouted, pushing the hand that she had reached out to him away. Claire held her hands up in surrender, clearly indicating that she was not a threat to him and took several steps backwards. Feeling an increasing sense of desperation, she told him simply, “They are going to kill us both if we
don’t help each other to get out of here.” She felt cold all the way down to her bones when he responded, “Then you’ve got a real problem because I’m not leaving here. I would rather die than leave the way I am now.” He walked past her, her eyes blown wide in shock, and climbed back through the window. And a few floors above, the man holding his fate in her hands looked on with no expression on his face.
Chapter Summary

The good news: it's time for Claire to get out of this mess! The bad news: it's going to get worse before it gets better. Oops :).

Later, Claire did the only thing she possibly could under the circumstances- she had another go at convincing Shepton to help her. When she was escorted back to the common room under guard that afternoon, she saw Shepton sitting at a table working on a pastel drawing. He had some real talent, she noted to herself as she glanced over his shoulder. But the colors . . . “Yellow sky. Interesting choice,” she told him. “I told you to stay away from me,” he replied, not looking up from his work. Claire took a deep breath, trying to calm her growing impatience. She knew it wasn’t long until lockdown- neither of them had much time left. How could she convince him that she wasn’t his enemy? She sat across from him at the table and said, “I know that you’re starting to remember some things. And I know that you think I had something to do with them, but I didn’t.”

“PISS OFF,” he nearly growled in reply. Suddenly, something clicked in Claire’s mind. “You can’t see colors, can you?” She knew she had connected when his hand stopped moving across the paper. A second later he looked up and said quietly, “Who are you? If you’re not one of the people who did this to me then how do you know that?” He was desperate, pleading. Claire thought for the first time that she might have a real chance of getting through to him. “I will tell you what you need to know. But first, you have to help me. I was sent here to get some information from you- but I don’t even care about that anymore. All I care about is that the main exit door has a dual key lock.” She had taken the time to observe the procedure the guards used to open the door while she was being escorted to the common room. She further explained, “That means it takes two people using two keys at the same time to open the door.”

“I told you I’m not leaving here,” he replied, but there was more uncertainty in his voice than she had heard before. It was like trying to break through a brick wall, she thought to herself. She just had to keep chipping away. “Please believe me: there are other people here who want to find out what’s in your head. And when they don’t, they will kill us both.”

“You want me to believe you, but you don’t tell me anything! I know I’ve seen you somewhere . . .” Claire knew that she had to give him something or she would lose all the ground she’d gained. “Alright. You were trained. You were programmed to follow orders.”

“What orders? To do what?”

“To kill.” He shook his head at her, whispering ‘no’, more to himself than to her. And since there was no easy way forward, she took the most direct way. “The things you’re remembering- they’re real. I know that’s hard to hear . . .” she trailed off as he shoved out of his chair and started stumbling away from her, towards the windows. She rose to follow but kept her hands up in front of her to show him that she wasn’t a threat. “When you’re following orders, you’re trained to see everything in black and white, to keep you detached from what you have to do. You’re not supposed to remember anything, but you are. Your training must be short-circuiting.” He was all the way back against the windows now, his posture and bearing more closely resembling an abused animal than a human being. Claire was sick to her stomach with the horrors she was revealing to
him, but he needed the truth. All of it. “What you did- it’s so painful to remember that you’re seeing in black and white all the time. It’s a defense mechanism but it’s good! It means you’re starting to heal; you’re starting to get better and better . . .”

“STOP IT! PLEASE! GUARD!” he shouted, his hands covering his ears to block out what she was telling him. A guard approached them and pushed Claire back with his forearm so he could escort Shepton from the room. At that moment, a second guard in the room said one simple word that chilled the blood in Claire’s veins: “Lockdown.” When he approached Claire, she said to him in a low voice, “Tell the doctor I have the information he needs.” It was a bluff, of course. She was out of time and out of options. The guard started tugging her along towards the stairs and she was trying to distract him, chatting him up about his tattoo. They got about halfway down the stairs and she struck, swinging her free arm across his throat. He gave her some resistance, but it didn’t take long for her to send him tumbling down the rest of the stairs. When he reached the bottom, she ran after him and unhooked the key ring from his belt.

A short time later, she was pushing a mop bucket down the main hallway of the hospital that led to the exit door, dressed in a one-piece janitor’s outfit and cap she’d found in a closet. She passed a guard and felt his eyes trailing after her as she kept walking. He was suspicious- she could feel that he’d stopped walking though she didn’t dare turn around. Every breath felt like shards of glass in her lungs as she kept walking, determined not to let on that anything was amiss. Finally, she heard his footsteps resume down the hall and risked one glance over her shoulder to ensure she was alone. Then she sped towards the door. Once there, she removed the mop head from the handle and pushed one of the exit door keys into the empty space left behind. It was the only way she could think of to try to operate both keys at the same time since the locks were much farther apart than the reach of her arms. As she was trying to get the feel of maneuvering the key on the end of the mop handle, she cried out in pain as a shock wand connected with the side of her torso. Her legs gave way underneath her and the guard she had seen in the hallway a short time earlier caught her under her arms. The S Branch operative was with him and said simply, “Take her.” Having recovered slightly from the shock, she started fighting back with everything she had, but the two men had a firm grip on her arms, and she wasn’t doing any damage as they dragged her down the hall. The last thing she expected to see out of the corner of her eye was Michael Shepton. He stepped into the hall from a nearby doorway with a fire extinguisher in his hands that he raised and slammed into the head of the S Branch operative. Claire took advantage of the confusion to knock out the guard, and when she saw the other man trying to raise himself from the floor, she grabbed the electric wand and pushed it firmly into his side. “Hurts, doesn’t it?” she said to him, briefly enjoying her moment of revenge for all the pain he’d inflicted on her since her arrival and for the death of MacLeary. She finally looked up at Shepton as he said to her, “You’re right. I don’t want to die in here.” She smiled at him and asked, “How did you get out of your room?”

“Pretended to swallow my tongue. Lifted the guard’s keys,” he shrugged. Off they ran down the hall together back to the exit door. As they lifted their keys to the locks on either side, Shepton froze. Claire went to him and put her hand on his arm. “Look at me. You can do this. Do you think I’d help you get out of here if I thought you’d kill someone?”

“Unless you’re planning on killing me,” he replied. Claire couldn’t blame him for being suspicious given everything he’d been through, but the thought of killing him was so far from her mind she nearly laughed out loud. Instead, she simply asked him, “Why would I do that?” He looked as if he wanted to tell her something, but he remained silent. She gave him her most reassuring smile- whatever it was, they could discuss it after they got out of this hell hole. He gave her a small nod and she went back to her side of the door. She counted down and seconds later, they turned their keys and opened the door to their freedom. The alarm sounded immediately. When they ran outside, a car (police or private security, Claire couldn’t tell in the dark) pulled up in front of them- the driver slammed on the brakes and barely avoided hitting Claire. He got out of the car and came
at Claire, but he was no match for either her skill or her adrenaline. She knocked him out, grabbed his gun, and she and Shepton drove off into the night together.

Claire was nearly delirious by the time she reached the OB8 safehouse—they’d been driving for hours and she was tired, hungry, and weak. But instead of addressing any of those needs, she pulled out the loose floorboard and found the hidden cell phone. She needed Jamie. It was that simple and that complicated. She felt like she imagined a drug addict would while going through withdrawals. She needed his voice more than sleep. She needed his comfort more than food. And she knew that even though they were far from being out of danger, he would make her feel safe. The shocks just kept coming, though, when she dialed his number and Lamb answered the phone. “Hello? Claire, is that you? Are you alright?” It wasn’t that she was unhappy to hear her uncle’s voice—any familiar voice was a balm to her soul at that moment. He simply wasn’t Jamie. And she very nearly broke down and wept in her disappointment. “Lamb? Where’s Jamie?” she blurted out, wondering if she had actually dialed the wrong number in her haste. “I had his number forwarded,” he told her. “Where are you?”

“I’m at the safehouse,” she said, and across the miles, Lamb’s eyes closed in a silent prayer of thanksgiving. No matter how cool he might have played it in his meetings with Randall and Jamie, he had been terrified for her. “Any trouble finding it?” he asked her. “It only took six hours of driving through the forest in the dark,” she replied wearily.

“Is Shepton with you?” Lamb asked her. She debated for a moment about whether to tell him the truth, looking at Shepton as he sat in front of the fire they’d built in the fireplace. “Yes,” she finally answered. She would figure out what to do about the mission, MI-6, and OB8 later. One foot in front of the other until she could get home, she thought to herself. Home to Jamie. She allowed herself the indulgence of imagining his strong arms around her for a moment until Lamb’s voice brought her back to reality. “Get to Düsseldorf Airport. There’s a charter flight waiting for you there under the name Pravika Petrol Corporation. The hardest part is over, Claire. We’ll talk when you get back.” She nodded even though she knew he couldn’t see her and before she could muster a response he had already hung up. When she walked over to join Shepton near the fire, he looked up at her and asked, “Why me? Why did you ever come talk to me?”

“I was looking for a man,” Claire told him. “Who?” he asked. It seemed eons ago that she’d sat through her mission briefing at OB8, as if it had happened in another lifetime to another Claire. But she felt a certain comradery with Shepton after what they had endured and escaped together. He’d had his life stolen from him, too. And he deserved answers. “A man you killed and buried. His name was Garrett Plishkov. That’s what I was sent to find.”

“A man I killed,” he repeated, part of him still not grasping the reality of what he’d done, what he’d been programmed to do. He said slowly, “The first time I had the images in my head it was like a seizure. Flashes of people, places, street signs. I thought I was remembering bad dreams because it was black and white, but it was so vivid. I don’t know how much of it was real. But I found the street sign I saw. I heard there had been a murder. A shopkeeper there recognized me. I was convinced I had to be delusional. I couldn’t be a killer. Where you found me was as remote a place as I could find to lock myself away in case I was wrong.” Claire couldn’t stop the tears that overflowed her eyes and streamed down her face. If anyone in the world could understand what it was like to have to face the fact that their entire life was an illusion, it was her. “It’s not your fault,” she told him earnestly. His eyes were streaming, too, and he said brokenly, “I feel like I’ve been stolen from myself. I don’t know if there was ever a me in the first place . . . Please, tell me who you are, Claire, maybe that will . . .” he trailed off. Her eyes had blown wide open and her jaw dropped. “How do you know my name?” she whispered. He fumbled as he tried to formulate a response but
by then, Claire had recovered her breath and managed to say again, louder, “HOW DO YOU KNOW MY NAME?”

“The banner,” he said quietly, looking down at his lap. “What banner?” she asked, although she had a sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach that she already knew. “It said ‘Happy Birthday Claire,’” he told her. Her mind flashed in an instant from the moment the photo was taken (her birthday party the year before that Geillis and Frank had somehow planned together) to the framed version of the photo she’d given to Frank that Christmas (his wide smile and kiss to express his pleasure at her gift) to the location of the framed photo in Frank’s apartment (to the left of the television in the living room). “I heard the water running . . .” he said, and her ears began to ring as he described to her what she had only been able to construct in her nightmares up until then. He described the final moments of her fiancé’s life. And just as Shepton had in the hospital, she couldn’t stop shaking her head, couldn’t stop her automatic and repeated denial of what she was hearing. When he’d finished, with his tears still flowing, he looked at her and simply said, “I’m so sorry.” She turned and ran out of the safehouse, not looking back. On and on she ran through the woods until she couldn’t draw enough breath to take another step. She wrapped her arm around a tree as her legs gave way and she sank down, down, down to the ground. And she was certain her body would simply shatter into a million pieces with the violence of her sobs that broke the silence of the night around her.

Sometime later (she would never know how much time had passed- time was a measurement that belonged to the outside world and had no meaning to Claire at that moment), she walked back into the safehouse and found Shepton in the same spot where he’d been when she ran from him, staring into the flames in the fireplace. He turned his head when she entered but looked away immediately. With no preamble, she said, “The man you were ordered to kill was my fiancé. His name was Frank. I told Frank I’m a spy because he was the one part of my life I couldn’t stand to be a lie. When OB8 found out, they called on one of their hitmen, someone they’d already enlisted. They called on you. I think the man who programmed you is named MacCullough, he’s their neuro tech. The irony is that they never lied to me about what would happen if I told someone. It was the one thing they said that turned out to be true. Now, I’m a double agent for MI-6. And I will be until OB8 is gone.”

“Will finding the place where Plishkov’s body is buried help you take down the people who did this to us?” he asked her. Us. Did this to us. Ultimately, that was what had brought Claire back to the safehouse, what allowed her to stand face-to-face with the man who’d murdered Frank. He was a victim, too. OB8 had used him for their purposes with no thought to the life they were destroying. Even though he had pulled the trigger, they had put the gun in his hand. And instead of taking some sort of empty revenge by punishing him, she would re-double her efforts to take her revenge where it would matter the most- by destroying the very heart of OB8 and The Federation itself. “Yes, it will,” she told him, and there was a burning fire in her words. She saw some of that fire kindle in his eyes when he said, “I left his body in marshland on the Louisiana-Mississippi border, off Interstate 10.” She nodded and he nodded in return. She was fighting for him now, too.
I am RIDICULOUSLY pleased with how this chapter turned out so of course I'm dying to know what you think of it! Let's get these two lovebirds reunited, shall we? :) Most decidedly NSFW!

“I told OB8 Shepton was dead,” Claire told Jamie in the storage warehouse after she returned to Inverness. “I was going to lie to you about it, too, but the truth is I can’t stand lying to anyone else,” she told him with a soft smile. They were sitting next to each other on a crate holding hands, Jamie’s thumb stroking back and forth gently. Neither one of them could bear to break contact with the other, both needing assurance of the reality of the other’s presence. When Claire arrived, her eyes had filled and her tears had begun to spill over as soon as she saw him and the relief that saturated his features. “Sassenach,” he said softly, with a slight hitch in his voice. Seconds later she was in his arms and she couldn’t tell which one of them was trembling and then she realized they both were. Jamie buried his nose in her curls, inhaling her scent as his shaking hands ran over her head, back, arms, whatever he could reach. Claire simply clung to him, allowing his comfort and warmth and strength to soak into her and wash away the terror of her ordeal in Prague. Jamie was the first to pull back, but only so he could gently kiss away her tears as he stroked her hair and spoke over her in Gaelic (“Tha thu an-seo, mo Sorcha. Tha thu sàbhailte. Tha thu gu math.” You are here, my Claire. You are safe. You are well.) It was hypnotizing and Claire swayed in his arms. He wrapped his arm around her and tucked her against his side with one last kiss to the top of her head before leading her to sit.

“Well, I appreciate that,” he said, smiling in return. Jamie finally felt like he could exhale fully, and it showed in the smile that lit his entire face. Claire felt as if she were staring directly into the sun and she nearly gasped at the overwhelming power and beauty of him. “And I’ll be honest with ye, too—there are people at the agency who will want him found, ye ken?”

“He’s as much a victim of OB8 as I am. Shepton buried the body in a Louisiana marshland. Randall sent out a forensics team to get a DNA sample. They should be able to use it to decode the message by tonight,” she told him. As tired as she still was from her ordeal, her body was beginning to respond to his touch. She barely realized she was moving closer to him until she felt the brush of his muscular thigh against hers. Their eyes caught and held, and he whispered, “We were worried.”

“I know. MI-6 hates to lose its assets,” Claire said with an attempt at humor. “No,” Jamie said immediately and with force. “I mean I was worried. For you. In fact, I contacted your uncle.” Claire knew something must have happened when she called Jamie’s phone and her uncle answered, but her eyebrows still shot up. She was even temporarily distracted from the shimer she was beginning to feel in her blood from his nearness. “Aye,” he said, noting her reaction and giving her a wry smile, “it went about as well as ye imagine. Just so ye know, he knows I pulled his file and he suspects you’ve seen it.” Claire simply shook her head and smiled back, saying, “It’s alright. Given the experience I’ve just had, sorting out my relationship with my uncle is quite low on my priority list just now. Thank you for trying to work with him. I know it couldn’t have been easy, especially with what’s happening between us.” Jamie’s nerves rose up and nearly choked him. It was exactly the kind of opening he’d been looking for, but he suddenly wondered if he’d be able to find the words he needed. So, he decided to put the ball back in her court. “Claire—what is happening
between us?” he said with a voice full of uncertainty. She looked down at where their hands were still joined, his thumb still stroking rhythmically over her skin. “It’s never been easy for me to put my feelings into words,” she began with a deep unsteady breath. “I know that Lamb loves me, but we never talked about it much growing up. And it’s not as if you and I can go out to dinner or take long walks together or do other things that ‘normal couples’ do. But, when I realized that there was a very good chance that I wasn’t going to make it home,” and she paused as her voice broke, Jamie gripping her hand and shuddering, “it was you who filled my thoughts. It was your voice I wanted to hear, your arms I wanted around me, your face I wanted to be my last vision in this world. I don’t know yet if I can define what it is between us, Jamie. All I know is that I haven’t had nearly enough of it.”

Jamie’s heart soared at her words and he could find no better response than to crush his mouth to hers, the intoxication of her mouth even more potent laced with the reminder of how close he’d come to losing her. His tongue plunged deep and she moaned, and he couldn’t believe how near he was to losing control just from the sound of her. She swung her leg over and straddled him, rocking her core against his rapidly growing hardness and it was his turn to moan. Claire felt emboldened in a way she never had before. She also knew that for her, it was much easier to communicate the depth of what she was feeling for him with actions rather than words. So, she tore her mouth away from his and pushed against the iron wall of his chest until he was flat on his back, looking up at her with an intensity of longing that turned her bones to water. She flowed down until she was kneeling before him, unbuckling his belt and opening the button and zipper on his pants as she went. A lift of his hips and a quick tug on his pants and boxers and he was free. Claire hadn’t really had the chance to look at him in the mad rush of their previous encounter and she was mesmerized, her tongue darting out to lick her lips without conscious thought in response to the pulsing length of him. Jamie couldn’t have moved if his life depended on it. He could see the focused intention in her gorgeous golden eyes and before he could draw his next ragged breath, her mouth descended on him.

“Jesus FUCK, Claire,” Jamie shouted, one hand gripping the edge of the crate for dear life and the other coming up to rest in her curls. There was no possible fantasy he had ever conjured that could come close to the sensations she created as she surrounded him, swallowed him, caressed him with lips and tongue and hands. Up and down, around the tip and back, she swirled and licked and sucked and stroked and then did it all again. In the small part of his brain that could still register such unimportant things as sounds, he realized that there was a nearly incoherent stream of Gaelic and English curses flowing from him. It was as if she had always had his body at her mercy, as if she instinctively knew exactly where and how to touch him, playing his nerves and skin and blood like her instrument and she the master musician. He felt himself boiling towards one of the hardest climaxes of his life when he realized her mouth had left him and his eyes flew open. With one hand around his screaming cock and the other on his balls, she stared straight into his soul and said simply, “Watch me.” Keeping her eyes locked on his, she surrounded him with her mouth once again and sucked hard, giving the barest hint of teeth as she traveled up and down his length. He flew over the edge and exploded into her mouth and she drank him down greedily, exulting in the way she’d made him lose control. He reached down to pull her up to him and as he tasted himself on her lips, he dimly heard his phone buzzing through the roaring of his blood.

“Ifriinn!” Jamie growled and Claire giggled. It was such a magically erotic sound that he groaned, knowing that they would have to part and ashamed to leave her wanting. Claire was feeling a bit unsteady but knew she had probably stayed longer than she should have anyway. They both stood and Jamie checked his phone as he re-fastened his pants, deciding to return the call on his way back to the office. “Och, Sassenach, I forgot to tell ye, that computer virus has been a gold mine.”

“Good,” Claire said emphatically. “Perhaps we can actually get ahead of them for a change.”

Facing each other, neither wanting to say goodbye but knowing they had to, Jamie ran his finger across Claire’s lower lip and then kissed her gently. “Go home. Get some rest.” She nodded,
knowing that her lips would still be tingling for hours after that simple touch. She also knew that her longing for Jamie would be relentless in the privacy of her bedroom later that night.

When Claire walked through the door of her flat, she smelled smoke before she saw Geillis. Her latest culinary effort was pouring smoke out of the oven and Claire quickly went to open the window while shouting over the smoke detector, “What happened?” Geillis straightened up from peering at the charred remains of supper and shouted back, “Where on earth have ye been? I left ye a thousand messages!” By the time Claire turned back from opening the window, Geillis had crossed the room and enveloped her in a hug. “My work trip got extended,” Claire told her, hugging her back fiercely, not wanting to let go of her best friend and feeling once again the sheer joy of being alive. “Are ye all right?” Geillis pulled back and asked her, studying her face. “I’m just happy to be home,” Claire told her, pulling her back in for another squeeze. They turned to look at the oven together and Geillis said simply, “I burned the roast.” Then they both started chuckling. Claire managed to respond, “Yes, I can see that,” before they both dissolved into further laughter. Claire found out, once they managed to clean up the mess, that Geillis had invited a few of their classmates over for dinner. Once they ordered take out Indian food and opened a bottle of wine, Claire found herself grateful for the company.

Later in the evening, Claire went to the door when she heard a knock and was surprised to see her Uncle Lamb standing outside, holding a paper in his hands. She stepped out and closed the door behind her to give them privacy. Not expecting any kind of emotional reunion even after her recent ordeal, she stood silently and waited for him to begin. “Here,” he said, handing her the paper, “this was outside your door.” Claire looked at it briefly and realized it wasn’t theirs. “Oh, it belongs to our neighbor,” she said, keeping things basic. “I’ll give it to him.” They fell into silence once again until Lamb suddenly announced, “Shepton killed Frank. I’m assuming you know that.”

“If I didn’t, thank you for breaking it to me so gently,” Claire said with a heavy note of sarcasm in her voice. Delicate as a hammer, she thought to herself. She managed to avoid rolling her eyes or shaking her head, but it was close. Lamb had caught her sarcasm, though, and responded in a slightly exasperated tone, “I’m telling you because I don’t want you to think it is my mission in life to keep things from you.” Without missing a beat, Claire shot back, “Then why do you?” He sighed and then reached into his jacket, pulling out a plain manila envelope, handing it to her. As she opened it and started to scan the contents, her eyes widened considerably. “MI-5 report. It’s nearly forty years old, signed by the deputy director, clearing me of all wrongdoing related to Russia,” Lamb told her as she looked up at him, her face a mixture of surprise and relief. “Claire, you have to understand it was the Cold War. Everybody was under suspicion. So, I suppose, in a way, Carter’s accident was my fault, since MI-5 was after me. If I could bring him back, I would.” She tried to hand the report back to him, but he shook his head and said quietly, “Take it.”

“I don’t need to,” she told him with a smile, the first real one she had given him in recent memory. He took the report back from her, a peace offering between them. “You should stay,” Claire told him as they heard laughter and the clinking of silverware and wine glasses inside. “Work,” he responded, still clearly uncomfortable with the idea of spending time with her socially. Baby steps, she thought. “Glad your trip went well.” She nearly laughed at that, but ultimately it had gone well because she was still standing. Without another word Lamb turned and left. Even though there was much she still didn’t know about her uncle’s past, he’d trusted her with a major piece of the puzzle. For the first time in a long time, Claire felt a glimmer of hope that they would be able to build a new relationship as adults, one built on trust and respect. She went back inside and joined her friends, feeling lighter, freer. It was a beginning.
Back at OB8 the next day, Claire was sitting in Randall’s office. He told her they had used the DNA sample obtained from Plishkov’s body to decode the ITO message. “It describes the possible recovery of an artifact related to Master Raymond’s work in Albania and says the dig is proceeding. Now we know where all their agents went,” he said dryly. Claire was surprised, having not heard any recent updates on the pursuit of Master Raymond’s work and secrets. But she knew it was a major priority for The Federation and for Randall himself to be in control of those secrets. “So, I’m going,” she said simply, even though she was not looking forward to going back into the field so soon. “No,” he said, surprising her again. “We sent an advance team to Albania, but the dig had already been evacuated. Clearly, they’d already found whatever was there. We traced the shipment to Harvard. They must have no idea what they’ve uncovered or else they wouldn’t risk sending it to civilians for analysis.” Claire was being sent to attend a reception at Harvard the following evening so that she could break into the lab and retrieve the artifact, whatever it was. Randall explained her assumed identity and cover story, that she would be posing as a representative from a non-profit organization looking for grant opportunities. After a few minutes of questions and answers, he told her, “Be careful, Claire. They will undoubtedly have a large security presence at the reception in case anyone tries . . . what we are about to try.” Claire nodded but couldn’t shake the feeling that Randall was watching her more closely than usual, scrutinizing her. It could just be that he was watching for signs of a hangover from her brush with disaster in Prague, but her gut told her it was more than that. She tried to sit as impassively as possible under his penetrating gaze, all the while wondering if he’d discovered something he wasn’t telling her. Finally, he dismissed her with a simple, “That will be all,” and went back to sit behind his desk.

Whatever was going on with Randall, Claire had to shove it to the back of her mind. She had a trip to prepare for and she needed to get in touch with Jamie about her counter mission for MI-6. As she left Randall’s office, she couldn’t help a small smile breaking over her face or the warmth that flooded through her as she thought of the thoroughly delightful prospect of another encounter with Jamie. She found her thoughts drifting to him often throughout the day, wondering what he was doing, what his routine was, imagining where he lived. She wanted to know all sorts of things about him that their circumstances had never allowed her to find out: how did he take his coffee? Was he messy or neat? Was he an early riser or did he sleep late? She wanted to know about everything he loved, what he feared, what motivated him. She felt as though she had barely scratched the surface of really getting to know him, that every little bit of knowledge she gained simply made her thirsty for more of him. He was addictive to her (even without considering her hopeless addiction to that incredible body of his), a source of endless fascination, a mystery she would gladly spend the rest of her days unraveling. Her thoughts drew up short at that. Even with all the obstacles in their path, with all the work they still had ahead of them, at some point in her mind she had started seeing a future that included him. It was a vision that went far beyond seeing him as a part of her work life. And although it certainly frightened her (could she take the risk to let someone else in knowing that they too could be stolen from her in the space of heartbeats?), it also exhilarated her. It was possible that she had another reward waiting for her at the end of her ultimate mission to destroy OB8- a second chance at happiness.

With her recent musings still fresh in her mind, Claire arrived at the storage warehouse for her counter mission briefing and immediately attached herself to Jamie’s mouth with gusto. It took Jamie by surprise, but his ardor quickly rose to meet hers as he rested his hands on her hips and pulled her body flush against his. Claire felt him hardening in response to their kisses and reluctantly broke away. They rested their foreheads together and struggled to catch their breath. “Work,” she said panting. “Oh, now ye want to work, Sassenach?” Jamie said with a smirk and a teasing note in his voice. Claire turned the full wattage of her smile on him as she stood in the circle of his arms. She simply couldn’t help herself; he stoked some sort of primitive joy inside her every time she was with
him. Nor could Jamie help his response to the power of that joy. He groaned and pulled her back in for another brief but equally torrid kiss. He abruptly let go of her and walked a few feet away to grip the chain link fence, his knuckles turning white with the force of his hold. “Ye’ll be the death of me, Sassenach,” he said in a low voice, and the sound of it resounded directly in her center. He risked a glance over his shoulder at her and nearly whimpered and dropped to his knees. Her curls were a riot around her head, her eyes were heavy and clouded with lust, and her lips were parted and bee-stung from their kisses. He wanted her naked so badly he began to think his comment about death wasn’t too much of an exaggeration. Taking some long, deep breaths with his eyes squeezed shut to calm himself, he somehow managed to pull himself back into work mode. “Whatever this artifact is, MI-6 wants pictures of it. You’ll photograph it once you get it and return to your hotel room (instant visions of rolling over crumpled sheets with a tangle of lips and limbs). We’ll plant a sub-mini camera in the Bible in the room and then retrieve it once you leave.”

“All right,” she said, and then he forced himself to turn around. This, to him, was the most important part, and he had to be facing her when he told her so she would understand. “There’s one more thing. One of our assets spotted Malva Christie leaving the psychiatric hospital in Prague after you escaped. Be careful, Claire. She’s on this.” The thought of Malva being anywhere in the same hemisphere as Claire sent a cold chill of dread down Jamie’s spine. Somehow, some way, he was going to have to get right back in the saddle of sending her out in the field (just like when he rode at Lallybroch) after Claire’s last mission threw him to the ground and left him dizzy and shaken. He looked at her and said, “You need to leave first.” She tilted her head to the side, trying to figure out the meaning behind his insistence. She normally left first, and he waited several minutes to make sure anyone who was watching was gone before he departed. His next words made her back up slowly and take hold of the chain link fence herself, needing the steadying of something solid and unmoving. “I need ye to walk out of here now, Claire, and I need ye to do it without touching me, because if ye don’t I will have ye now and neither of us will be leavin’ any time soon, aye?” His eyes had gone midnight, nearly black, and they were piercing into her soul. He could have her, she realized. Anytime, anywhere, any way he wanted. She couldn’t possibly refuse him when he spoke to her and looked at her like that. So, despite every cell in her body screaming for her to go to him and douse the burning ache they were both feeling, she did as he asked and walked out of the storage facility with nothing more than a nod in his direction. It took a long time for Jamie to collect himself enough to follow behind her.

When Claire went back to her flat to pack for her trip, she grabbed the mail on her way inside. Her eye was immediately caught by a small postcard with a colorful pastel drawing on one side. It was a familiar looking landscape scene. It took her only a few moments before she placed it: it was the same landscape she’d seen Shepton drawing in the asylum. Only this time, there was no yellow sky, replaced by a vibrant shade of blue. She quickly turned the postcard over. It had no return address and two simple lines of text: Blue skies again. I owe you. They may not have defeated OB8 yet, but there was one person who was already free of their grasp. And despite her current impatience over her situation with Jamie, the mere fact of Shepton’s existence, out there in the world living a free life away from their grip, was like a beacon of hope to Claire. She could go back into the field with the glow of that knowledge tucked close to her heart and let it drive her on toward her goal.

At that very moment, at OB8, Jonathan Randall was on the phone with Alan Christopher, head of The Federation. “What is going on with your mole problem?” Christopher asked. “There are some in The Federation who think you may have more than one. It is important that you make an example of them.”

“I know. I’m taking care of it,” Randall assured him.
Chapter Summary

I noticed after I wrote it that this chapter is a bit dialogue-heavy- I will give you some extra meat next time to make up for it, ok? Thank you all for reading and for hanging with me! I appreciate all of you so much!

Claire and Joe were sitting in a non-descript white van on the campus of Harvard University. Claire had a momentary burst of annoyance as she struggled with her gun holster under her evening gown and wondered why it always seemed like Joe got to stay in the van while she had to wear all the too-short too-tight outfits. All part of the job, she thought wryly to herself. Joe broke into her thoughts with a question: “If this artifact was recovered in Albania, why send it here?”

“For analysis,” Claire told him, finally satisfied with the placement of her gun and (mostly) satisfied with the placement of her hair. “The engineering science department here is one of the best in the world.” She checked her lipstick one more time in her compact mirror and asked, “How do I look?” Joe gave her a smile with a shake of his head and said, “For the record, that’s a question you never have to ask anybody, LJ.” Claire smiled back at his compliment but warned before she left the van, “Watch your back.”

“You too,” he told her, and she slid the van door open and went to join the reception. Once inside, she looked around for her intended target: the professor whose key card would give her access to the engineering science lab. Joe was telling her in her earpiece that the card reader attached to her purse had to be within a certain range for a minimum of five seconds in order to read the card so he could copy it. “Got him,” Claire said when she spotted Professor Tom Jurgenson. “The card is in his front jacket pocket,” Joe told her as she approached. “Ok, hold there,” he said. She engaged the professor in conversation (with an assist from Joe who fed her the subject matter of his latest research through her earpiece) for just long enough to let Joe finish the copy and then excused herself. When she turned away from the professor to head towards the door to meet Joe, a familiar dark-haired woman caught her eye, walking toward the engineering lab with another professor. Joe came into the party dressed as a waiter and palmed the key card to her as she took a drink from his tray. In a low voice, she told him, “Call campus security. Tell them someone is trying to break into the engineering lab.”

“And why would we want to do that?” he asked into her earpiece as he turned and walked back out to the van. “Malva is here,” she told him. “Copy that,” he told her. “Alerting campus security now. Be careful, Claire.” When Claire made her way down the stairs, she rounded a corner just in time to see Malva fighting with two campus security guards. She had already knocked out the professor Claire had seen her with, and the guards were clearly not buying her explanation. Claire lifted her champagne flute in a mock salute to Malva as she walked by, the guards far too preoccupied with holding Malva steady to notice Claire. Claire then picked up the pace and ran to the door of the lab, knowing the guards wouldn’t be able to keep a trained fighter like Malva subdued for long. Once she used her copied key card to open the door, she took the rest of the champagne in her flute and splashed it on the card reader as the door closed behind her. She saw the sparks fly and smiled. Malva ran up to the glass panel door just then and, just as Malva had done to her when their paths crossed in Barcelona, Claire pressed a kiss to the glass, leaving only the imprint of her lipstick behind as she went to search for the artifact.
Given the fact that she didn’t even know exactly what she was looking for, Claire hoped that the answer would make itself obvious rather quickly. She ran up and down the rows of lab benches until a small, old, non-operational clock caught her eye. *That has to be it,* she thought to herself. And then, the sound of gunshots snapped her head up. Unable to enter the lab using the card reader, Malva was shooting her way through the door. Claire grabbed the clock and tucked it under her arm as she headed for the window on the far end of the room. She climbed up on the lab bench, jostled the window open and slid through it. When Malva reached the window and looked out, the non-descript white van carrying Joe, Claire, and the clock was speeding away from campus.

Back on her campus in Inverness, Claire winced as her professor used the word ‘unacceptable’ to describe the most recent assignment she’d turned in. As she had done before, she tried to explain the difficulties of balancing her job with her studies. He cut her off and said, “Claire, we’ve been over this, and it seems like nothing has changed. If you want to be a banker, go be a banker.” Claire shook her head in denial and said, “I understand that this is probably not the best work I’ve ever done. But, it’s certainly better than a D.”

“Claire, it seems like your heart is not in your work anymore. I know you’ve been through a lot, but I simply cannot continue making allowances for your performance. You have until Friday to rework this assignment. Otherwise, I will have to re-evaluate your place in this program,” he told her solemnly. Feeling her stomach churning alongside an intense wave of gratitude that he wasn’t throwing her out already, she thanked him profusely and committed to fixing her work and getting it to him by the deadline. As he turned to head to his next class, Claire made her way back to the parking garage. She walked by a man talking on his cell phone on the way to her car. Nothing unusual about that in itself, but Claire was instantly on alert. First, as she pulled out her own phone, she re-confirmed what she already knew. There was no way the man was having a real conversation because there was no cell service in the garage. Second, he had fallen into step a short distance behind her. Claire kept walking as if nothing were amiss until she suddenly ducked between two parked cars and out of sight of her pursuer. He walked back and forth, in and out between the cars searching for Claire while still trying to continue his fake phone conversation. When he came close enough, Claire swung down from her hiding place over the pipes in the ceiling and her feet connected soundly with the middle of his chest. In one continuous motion, she placed one foot on his chest to hold him in place, reached into his jacket to grab his gun from its holster, cocked it and stuck it under the waistband of his pants. “Who are you? WHO ARE YOU?”

“Security Section said you assaulted one of their officers,” Randall told Claire when she finally made it into the OB8 office. He was sitting on the edge of her desk as she paced back and forth in front of him, seething with anger. “This wasn’t Security Section,” she told him in clipped tones, keeping her voice quiet even though she wanted to scream to the ceiling. “This wasn’t standard procedure. This was a tracker. And he’s been constant. I’ve seen him three times in the past two days. I found this under my car,” she told him, holding up the tracking device she’d discovered after her encounter in the parking garage. “If there’s something you want to know about me, then you *ask me.*” He stood and she automatically took a step backwards; not in fear, simply loathe to share that much of the same space with him. “The sanctity of this agency requires the sacrifice of some personal freedoms,” he told her, and she clasped her hands behind her back to keep from pounding them into his face. “OB8 is stepping up security. MacCullough assigned the tracker; it’s his province. Now, we have a briefing. Do you think you can focus?”

“Yes. I think I can,” she bit off. Randall gave her a smile and said, “Good,” and walked away. Claire closed her eyes and took a few slow, deep breaths to calm herself and clear her mind. As
furious as she was with Randall and MacCullough, as worried as she was about what the increased scrutiny could mean, she couldn’t afford to let her emotions rule her. She couldn’t afford to lose focus, even for a second, because then she would be at her most vulnerable. She concentrated on filling her lungs, slowing down her pounding heart, and clearing her head of everything but the task at hand. Then she walked into the briefing room and took her seat. It was a smaller group with only Ned, Randall, and herself present. Randall started off by telling her that the clock she recovered from Harvard was made by a French clockmaker named Donais. “He was the only person we know of who ever directly collaborated with Master Raymond. Raymond actually commissioned the clock himself.” Ned broke in, unable to contain his excitement. “It is incredibly accurate and advanced given how old it is; it has a margin of error of less than one second per decade. But there is one gear in the clock that seems to serve no purpose. We also found a series of numbers on the back of the clock,” he said as he handed Claire a magnifying glass. She looked through it and said, “A date?”

“That’s what we think,” Ned replied. “But do you know what happened on that date? Nothing. It seems like it’s one of the only dates in history when absolutely nothing of significance occurred.” Claire’s eyes widened at that. It certainly did seem strange. Then Randall continued, “From what we know about Master Raymond’s work, this clock should reveal another piece of the puzzle. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work. The good news is that we found a direct descendant of Donais who also still happens to be in the family business. Your mission, Agent Beauchamp, is quite simple. Take the clock to him in Marseilles, have him repair it and get it working, and bring it back.”

“That’s all?” Claire asked, surprised at being given what appeared to be an extremely easy assignment. “That’s all,” Randall told her. When Claire walked out of the briefing room, she spotted her Uncle Lamb and quickly made her way to him. “Claire, what is it?” he asked her, easily able to read the worry on her face. “We need to talk. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere not here,” she told him in a low voice. He turned and walked back toward the briefing room she had just left, and she fell into step behind him. They sat next to each other and he closed the doors, shielding them from prying eyes. Then he pulled what looked like a pen out of his jacket pocket and removed the cap. “Signal jammer. It will mask our conversation for sixty seconds. Talk quickly,” he told her. Claire set the timer on her watch and began, “Randall is having me followed. I confronted the guy. I thought he might have been S Branch looking for revenge after Harvard. I talked to Randall and he insists it’s all routine. Should I be worried?”

“I’m one of only five upper-level agents in this office who knows the truth about OB8,” Lamb replied. “I’ve had Randall’s trust but lately he hasn’t told me much. Two things concern me. First, while you were in Prague, Ned detected some computer abnormalities. I thought it might have just been a system error, but they may have detected that the network was compromised.”

“Would they be able to trace it to MI-6?” Claire asked. “I don’t know,” Lamb answered, which certainly wasn’t reassuring. Claire was more worried with each passing second. “The second thing is that Craig Dwyer is coming from Central OpTech to upgrade all the biometric scanners in the building. That also means we might all be getting functional imaging tests as well- he’s the expert. It’s a type of lie detector test.”

“I’ve studied the MI-6 manual about how to take a successful lie detector test,” Claire told him, but he shook his head. “It isn’t like that. This test measures blood flow inside the brain. It’s very difficult to deceive. Tell your handler Fraser he needs to prepare you for this test. If he can’t, he’ll get someone from MI-6 who can,” Lamb said urgently. Claire finally voiced the one thing that had her more worried than anything else. “Lamb, you seem nervous.” Before he could respond, the beeping of her watch told her that their sixty second window of privacy was over. He replaced the cap on the signal jammer and returned it to his jacket as they both stood and he said loudly, “Yes, I think that will be fine.” Claire followed his lead and replied, “I agree. Thank you for taking the
time.” With her insides in knots, she forced a smile and walked back out of the briefing room. Before she could prepare for her trip to France, she needed to contact Jamie. She had to start preparing for the functional imaging test as soon as possible. It was her only chance to stay alive.

Claire usually relished every one of her clandestine meetings with Jamie, especially when they had the chance to tap into the passionate yearning that was always bubbling near the surface between them. But now, hooked up to the MI-6 equipment they were using to practice for the functional imaging test, Claire was filled with an overwhelming sense of dread. It wasn’t that she was unhappy to see Jamie or that she didn’t experience a great sense of relief in his presence as she always did. It was that this situation seemed more overwhelming, more dire, more jarring than even his tender words and soft touches could overcome. And every time he asked her a question and she saw the numbers on the screen spike as she gave her answer, the feeling grew worse. She was scared. She could feel it in the set of her jaw, the clutch of her fingers onto the edge of her blouse, the endless tapping of her right foot on the floor. *I can also tell because this bloody machine won’t stop beeping at me,* she thought to herself.

“Have you ever had any unauthorized contact with any other security agency besides OB8?” Jamie asked her. “No,” she responded slowly and clearly, trying to get out of her own head. The numbers spiked again, and she nearly groaned in frustration. Jamie said patiently, “We want the numbers to stay below thirty, ye ken? This test measures blood flow to the emotional center of your brain. You can divert the blood flow by engaging the reasoning center.”

“I’m trying,” Claire told him, unable to keep the frustration from leaking into her voice. He nodded but replied, “You’re responding emotionally, Sassenach.”

“Jamie, it’s not as if there’s a switch I can flip.”

“You have to split your focus.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe I’ve split my focus too much already: OB8, MI-6, school, my friends.”

“Claire,” he said gently, his voice nearly a caress while those fathomless blue pools looked straight into her soul. “Ye can do this. Ye have to.” She heard the slight quaver in the last words that he couldn’t keep out of his voice and knew that he was scared, too. He was fighting for her as much as she was fighting for herself. Somehow that knowledge settled in her heart and everything seemed to go still. Her jaw relaxed. Her fingers released their grip. Her foot settled in place. She was not alone. She nodded at him and again, he asked her, “Have you ever had any unauthorized contact with any other security agency besides OB8?”

“No,” she said calmly, and they both watched the number on the screen . . . drop. “Better,” he said with a note of pride. Then, with barely a pause, he asked, “Are you currently in love with anyone?” Claire cocked her head to the side and stared at him, and this time it was her whiskey eyes that went barreling through his defenses. *If looks could kill I’d be a dead man,* he thought. “It could be a question,” he told her. There was not a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “No, I’m not,” she said forcefully- and the number on the screen skyrocketed. “Interesting,” Jamie said, looking down at the notebook in his lap to hide his smirk. “Wait. Ask me that again,” Claire insisted. “Don’t need to. We have our answer right here, aye? Moving on,” Jamie declared.

“Hey,” Claire said with an earnest pleading in her voice that got Jamie’s full attention. “If this were real, I would be dead by now. Wouldn’t I?” It nearly paralyzed him. Claire’s spirit, her presence, her very self always seemed larger than life to Jamie. She seemed to always be able to handle
whatever her crazy life threw her way, and she did so with such strength and singularity of purpose that Jamie was constantly in awe. But with that simple question, she was suddenly small. Vulnerable. Uncertain. He was simultaneously undone by it and overwhelmed by the desire to cradle her to himself and somehow protect and shield her from what was to come. And even though he would have sworn it to be impossible even hours ago, he found that he loved her even more than he ever had before. Needing to touch her, to let some of his emotion flow into her and give her strength, he simply reached out and clasped her hand. “Hey,” he said, “we’re just getting started here, aye?” She took his hand, held on to it as the lifeline he intended it to be, then released it (it would be an impossible task to divert blood flow from the emotional center of her brain while holding his hand and she knew it) and nodded. Yes. They were just getting started.
A little bit of everything . . . (and don't worry- Jamie and Claire will get some extra time together next week!) THANK YOU to everyone who is reading, commenting, and following this story- I appreciate all of you so much!

Claire, with the clock in a backpack on her shoulders, walked into a beautifully old building in Marseilles. It was one of those delightful relics of the past with a metal gate she had to push to the side to let her into the lift. Claire knocked on the door where she knew to look for Donais, but instead of the door opening, he opened a small peephole, the opening covered in wrought iron bars. They carried on a conversation in perfect French with her telling him her alias and the purpose of her visit. The conversation didn’t last long, and the peephole closed in her face while she continued to try to talk her way in. Then, she said what were apparently the magic words: Master Raymond. Before she knew it, the door opened, and she was sitting across Monsieur Donais’ desk from him while he examined the clock.

“These designs were coveted by royalty. ‘Make us a clock, Donais,’ they would tell him. They were miracles of precision. But he only built one for Master Raymond because he made my ancestor a promise,” Donais told Claire as he looked over the clock. He was a kindly-looking white haired man with a tiny pair of wire-rimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose. Claire thought he was looking over the clock with an almost loving admiration, as if seeing an old friend after a long absence. “What did Raymond promise?” Claire asked him. She felt as if she were in a class and Donais the professor; he had seen much, and she was fascinated by him. “He said he would live an extraordinary life in another time. Even revealed when he would die.”

“Was he right?” Claire wondered. It seemed too extraordinary to be true, but Donais simply nodded without looking up and said, “Of course.” Something caught Claire’s eye that she hadn’t noticed before, a small symbol on the front of the clock. It resembled an eye, with a circle in the middle and two sideways ‘v’ shapes on either side. “What is that?” she asked Donais, pointing at the symbol and feeling a strange sense of déjà vu as she looked at it. “That is the symbol of the Order of Raymond, a society of people committed to guarding his works. Unfortunately, over the years, criminals have infiltrated the order and use the symbol for their own purposes,” he said sadly, shaking his head. “Do you know what the date on the bottom means?” Claire asked him. “It must have meant something to Master Raymond.”

“He never did tell me what it meant,” Donais almost mumbled to himself. Claire was certain she hadn’t heard him right. He made it sound like he had a conversation about it with Master Raymond himself. “What did you say?” she asked incredulously. “My mother,” he said, somewhat quickly but with a slight smile. “She never told me what it meant. I don’t think she knew.” He had a faraway look in his eyes but came back to the present with a short declaration: “There’s a piece missing.”

“So, it won’t work?” Claire wondered. She winced internally- she was going to have quite a job when she returned to Inverness explaining to Randall that her mission had failed. “It will tell time if that’s what you mean,” Monsieur Donais told her simply, and as she watched he turned the clock on. Claire breathed a sigh of relief but also felt as though she had a hundred more questions than
those with which she’d arrived. Everything about Master Raymond and Monsieur Donais seemed shrouded in mystery, and she was certain that there was much more to the story than what Donais had chosen to reveal to her.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to either Claire or Monsieur Donais, three floors below them, Malva Christie entered the building and boarded the same elevator Claire had been on only a short time before. Across the street, an S Branch sniper was setting up his rifle, his scope looking directly into the window where Claire and Donais sat. As Malva rode up the elevator, the sniper let her know the moment the clock was turned on. “The clock is finished,” he told her through her earpiece. “I have Beauchamp in my sights.” Without even a hint of emotion, Malva replied, “Take the shot whenever you have it.”

Back upstairs, Claire said gently but firmly, “Monsieur Donais, what was Master Raymond working on?” She thought she had never heard a man wearier than he when he responded, “The clock is fixed. Now, it’s over.” He rose and pushed his chair back from his desk. As he stood, the window behind him exploded in a shower of broken glass and Claire felt fine droplets of blood splatter on her face as the sniper’s bullet pierced his heart. Claire plastered herself to the floor as the sniper continued firing. She was breathing heavily and trying not to cry as she searched in vain for any signs of life from Donais. But he was gone. Without coming out from under the desk, she reached over the top and grabbed the clock, shoving it back in her backpack and making her way in a crouched run towards the door. As soon as the sniper had to stop to reload, she had her chance and she took it, opening the door and sprinting back towards the elevator—where she came face to face with Malva.

With only a moment’s hesitation, Claire turned and ran up the stairs. Malva stayed on the elevator and continued up while two other S Branch operatives chased Claire on foot. Up and up and up she ran until she ran out onto the roof of the building, which was surrounded by a low wall topped with an iron railing all the way around. As she ran, Claire swung her backpack around her body and pulled out a metal hook, ducking and weaving as Malva and the two other S Branch operatives started shooting at her as soon as they made it to the roof themselves. Barely breaking stride, Claire hooked onto the metal railing at the edge of the roof and threw herself over, the cable releasing from her specially designed backpack as she dropped. Once she got close to the ground, she swung herself slightly towards the building so she could avoid the gunshots from above once Malva reached the railing. She unhooked the end of the cable that was in her backpack, and Malva and her colleagues could only watch in frustration as Claire ran off to disappear into the streets of Marseilles.

Simultaneously wired and exhausted, Claire stumbled into her flat and went straight to the sofa. Without even bothering to remove her shoes, she stretched out and flung her arm across her eyes for a moment to try to ward off the headache she could feel blooming behind them. She heard Geillis’ footsteps before she heard her exclaim, “Well, I wonder who this could be. I used to have a roommate, but I thought she didn’t live here anymore.” Claire moved her arm just long enough to pop one eye open in annoyance as Geillis pushed her feet back to slide onto the end of the sofa. “So, I have good news and bad news. Which do ye want first?” Not hesitating for a moment, Claire said, “Good news. Please.”

“I went to the professor’s office to hand in the rework of yer assignment,” Geillis told her. “I was going to leave it with the assistant but remember what happened in second year of university?” Claire shuddered and nodded, one of those memories of academic trauma that would never completely go away. “So, I waited around for a bit,” Geillis continued, “and when he arrived, I put it directly into his hands.”
“Thank you,” Claire said, relieved. “You may have saved my place in the program. Whatever would I do without you?”

“Well before ye promise to name yer firstborn in my honor, you need to hear the bad news,” Geillis responded with a distinctly worried look on her face. Instead of waiting, Geillis charged ahead and decided to get it all out at once. “I was making myself some tea earlier and I spilled on one of yer uncle’s books and I’m sae sorry, Claire,” she said as she handed Claire the book. It was part of a set of rare first editions her uncle had collected in his younger years. He’d gifted them to Claire when she turned eighteen, one of the few tangible gifts he’d ever given her since they’d traveled so much during her childhood. She remembered being quite stunned by it and still felt a sense of awe that he’d entrusted something he clearly valued greatly to her care. The book did not appear significantly damaged and she hurried to reassure Geillis, “It’s all right. Truly. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are ye sure?” Geillis asked, still concerned but looking slightly relieved that Claire didn’t seem to be upset with her. “Yes, I promise, Geillis. It’s fine. Now, what should we do about dinner? I’m starving and we need to catch up. You need to tell me all about that solicitor you’re seeing. You are still seeing him, right?” Claire pushed herself up off the sofa as she and Geillis continued chatting and she pulled her suitcase to her room, book still in hand. She placed it on her bedside table and decided to take a closer look at it later, just to make sure the damage was as minor as her first impression told her it was.

That night, with a glass of red wine in hand, Claire slowly turned the pages of her book, the soft glow of her bedside lamp (plus a few candles, because why not? she’d thought to herself) showing her the familiar landscape she knew so well. She remembered sneaking a peak at them when she was younger, only daring to get into Lamb’s things when she knew she wouldn’t get caught. She moved more slowly when she got to the tea-stained pages, but it didn’t appear to have damaged the text as Geillis had moved quickly to pull the book out of harm’s way. As Claire examined the staining along the outer margin of one page, a faint pattern caught her eye. She sat more upright in bed, placed her wine glass on the bedside table, and picked up one of the candle holders. Carefully, she held the light behind the page and her heart sank as she realized that her first passing thought had been correct. They were lines of Cyrillic code, hidden in the margins of her uncle’s books. The form was standard, easily recognizable from her training. It was the way the KGB communicated with their spies.

“Have you leaked information about OB8 to any other intelligence agencies?” Jamie asked Claire during their next practice session for the functional imaging test at the warehouse. “No,” Claire answered, steady and calm, and the numbers were just as steady. “Are you a double agent?” Jamie pressed on, just as Dwyer would when he gave her the real test. “No. But my uncle is,” Claire responded. Jamie smirked in response, thinking she was joking, and said, “I’m sure he’d be thrilled if you gave Dwyer that answer.”

“Not for MI-6. Forty years ago, for the KGB,” Claire let this statement hang in the air, almost like a speech bubble in a cartoon. But there was no humor here. Since Jamie didn’t seem to have an immediate response, she kept going. “My uncle had a set of books that he collected for years. Rare books, first editions. He gave them to me on my eighteenth birthday. I found codes hidden in the margins of those books: cypher text, sets of five Cyrillic letters.”

“Hallmark of the KGB,” Jamie muttered to himself. Claire nodded and said, “The KGB used those codes to communicate with their operatives. And apparently, they were using them to communicate with my uncle. I know that he was officially cleared by MI-6 but they obviously didn’t know about this.” The more Claire spoke, the more agitated she became, and the functional imaging machine
was going wild in response to her surging emotions. Just as he had during their previous meeting, Jamie reached out and held Claire’s hand. Just as he had during their meeting on the bridge, he stroked his thumb back and forth over her skin. *I am here*, he said without words. “We need to prioritize,” he said to her calmly, grounding them both in the moment. “We will deal with what ye’ve told me, and I want to see those books. But ye still have Dwyer’s test coming up, and yer life still depends on how well ye do, Sassenach.” He couldn’t help but say it, knew they had to face the reality head-on. But he also couldn’t help the fact that the words caught in his throat and his gut clenched harder than it had on the one and only boat ride he’d ever attempted. The agony of loving Claire was having to constantly cope with the possibility of losing her before he’d ever really had her. He’d had her body, of course, but he wanted so much more. He wanted a life, a completely normal, boring, mundane life that would never truly be any of those things simply because he shared it with the most stimulating and fascinating woman he’d ever known.

“You’re right. But Jamie? Would it be alright if we took a short break?” Claire asked, although she was already beginning to peel the sensors from her face. “Aye, of course,” Jamie replied. “Do ye need something, Sassenach? Water? Coffee?” Claire paused a moment and looked down as though she were embarrassed. In spite of the fact that they had touched and tasted each other, come apart in each other’s arms, she felt as though what she wanted to ask him was almost unbearably intimate (especially for one who still felt uncomfortable putting her tender feelings out in the open). Gathering her courage, she managed to meet his eyes as she stood and said, “Will you please hold me? Just for a bit? I’m . . . I’m afraid, Jamie.” He made a small sound that was a mixture of pleasure and pain (how could she disassemble him and make him whole again all at once?) and opened his arms to her. He enveloped her in his embrace and there they stood, neither attempting to rouse the other, simply taking a moment to anchor in the safe harbor of the other’s arms.

The next day, Claire was in the briefing room at OB8 with Randall, Ned, and Joe. Ned had the clock in front of him on the large conference table as Randall began by saying, “For some time we’ve been operating on the assumption that the collection of Master Raymond’s works was greater than the individual parts. This clock appears to be further evidence to support that assumption.” Ned pulled out another object, held it up, and said, “Remember this?” Claire nodded; her recognition instantaneous. “The polymer. From the church in Marbella.” She gave a wry smile as her muscles seemed to groan in their own form of recognition, remembering her fight with Malva. The body had a memory all its own, it seemed. As they watched, Ned took the polymer disk and inserted it in the clock. “Now if we set the time to 12:22 . . .” he said as he turned the hands. When he let go, the hands started spinning rapidly, and the polymer spun with them. It was like nothing Claire had ever seen, and she realized her mouth was hanging open but was powerless to stop it. So mesmerized was she that Ned had to nudge her a few times before she realized he was trying to hand her a magnifying glass. She took it, and as the whole apparatus slowed, he pointed to a spot and she looked through the magnifying glass. “What is it?”

“It’s a star chart,” Randall answered. “It shows a snapshot of the sky from one spot on Earth at one particular moment in time.” Everyone turned as Lamb entered the room. Randall nodded as acknowledgement of his joining the briefing and continued, “The star chart connects to the date on the back of the clock. The only place with that exact view of the sky on that date in history is the southern slope of Mount Illimani in Bolivia.” Ned broke in, unable to contain his excitement. “It’s almost unbelievable, really. These two things, on their own? They don’t tell you anything. But when you put them together, it’s like GPS. I’m absolutely flabbergasted.”

“Do we think Raymond has something stored there?” Joe asked. “Possibly,” Randall answered. “Your mission is to find out. Ned will fill you in on the tech you’ll need. Oh, and Claire, before you head out, I want you to go down to Psych and see Craig Dwyer.” Claire was outwardly calm as she
nodded and stood, but everything inside of her had frozen in dread. The moment for the functional imaging test had arrived, and sooner than she’d expected. In spite of her discovery of the codes, she met Lamb’s eyes as she walked out of the room, not even sure what she hoped to find there but needing to connect with the only person present who knew exactly what she was about to face. He gave her the smallest of nods and she drew some reassurance from it. Then, as she walked to meet her fate, she allowed herself to fall into the memory of Jamie’s strong arms around her from the night before. She conjured it so well she could almost feel his hands stroking up and down her back, over the cascade of her curls, the warmth of his palm as it cupped her cheek when they pulled apart. But eventually, she forced herself to slowly allow her emotions to drain away, emptying her mind as if she’d pulled the plug in her bathtub. All that was left was what she needed to survive the questions ahead.
I think it's time for a little NSFW, wouldn't you agree? ;)

Claire remembered the room well. Not because it was memorable in itself— in fact, the room was as stripped down and bare as it could possibly be. All grey, no pictures. If you added bars it could be a prison cell. The memory of it, however, was burned into her brain like a brand and would be for all her days. She’d had to sit in this very chair, in fact, and take a lie detector test the night she’d stumbled into OB8 covered in Frank’s blood, the night her entire world dissolved around her. Just like that night, her life depended on how well she answered these questions. Unlike that night, she now had something to hide.

“What color are your eyes?”

“Golden brown.”

“Are you sitting down?”

“Yes.”

“Do you work for OB8?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a double agent?”

“No.”

In the blood mobile on campus later that day, Jamie was explaining to Claire the tech she would be taking with her to Bolivia to transmit their findings (whatever they were, if there were any) to MI-6. Jamie could tell he didn’t have her full attention, though. She was nervous and distracted in a way he’d never seen her before. He’d helped train horses at Lallybroch growing up. He had quickly discovered that there were as many different types of horses as there were types of people. Some horses were mild-mannered and took to the training easily. Some were quick-tempered and fought every step of the way. And some were skittish, difficult to settle, having to be trained in short bursts because they couldn’t stay on task for too long. It was the last type of horse that reminded him of Claire just then (although he had far more sense and value for his life than to tell her so). Instead, he stopped the tech briefing and gently took her chin in his hand. “Ye seem distracted, Sassenach. Is it the test?”

Claire looked slightly sheepish and somewhat relieved that she had a chance to talk about it with someone. But it still took her a full minute before she responded, “I’m not sure I passed. And it took me twenty minutes to throw off the person they had tailing me.”

“They wouldn’t be sending you on a mission if you failed,” Jamie told her firmly, trying to reassure himself as much as her. Even though he’d known it was a possibility, hearing her say she might
have failed the test terrified him in ways he couldn’t describe. “I don’t think they know the results
yet,” Claire said. Jamie had to turn away from her for a moment to collect himself enough to say
what he had to say next. The words ground like broken glass in his throat when he looked back at
her and said, “Look. I know how much ye want to do this- take down OB8. But yer life is more
important. If ye really think ye failed the test we have a plan in place to take ye out- a protection
program…” It was the same thing he’d told her uncle when she was trapped in the mental hospital
in Prague. Now he was telling her face-to-face and it was killing him. But it was a death he would
die a thousand times and gladly, even if it meant having to sacrifice a life with her before he’d even
had the chance to make one. There was no question in his mind that he would do whatever it took to
save her life, including sending her out of his life forever, his heart’s blood draining from his body
with every step she took into the shelter of a new identity in a different place with a different name.

But curse her stubborn hide, she wasn’t having it. “No,” she said simply. “I can’t do it, live in
hiding. Not a chance.” Then Jamie surprised them both when he grabbed her shoulders in a firm
grip, gave her a small shake and said, “Damn you Sassenach! If you die on me now, I swear I’ll kill
ye.” And with that he pulled her into his embrace and kissed her with all the yearning and frustration
and fear and love boiling inside him in a fearsome and powerful brew. Claire was startled but it took
mere seconds for her own need to rise to match his, her own emotions mixing with his to fuse their
mouths together as if their very existence depended on the connection. Claire backed up and sat on
the desk behind her (some corner of her mind registering that it was the same desk Jamie had spread
out The Federation map on during their first meeting in this blood mobile), wrapping her legs around
Jamie’s waist and never losing contact with his lips. So focused was she on the feel of his lips, how
he tasted when her tongue dove into his mouth (some amazing combination of breath mints and
coffee- was it possible to become addicted to someone’s mouth? she wondered), she hardly noticed
the disappearance of her pants and underwear until she felt the cool surface of the desk on her arse.
There was no possible way for her to not notice, however, when Jamie’s mouth tore away from hers
with a grumbled, “I have to taste ye, Sassenach.” The next thing she knew, he was kneeling in front
of her and her legs were hitched over his shoulders and when his tongue plunged between her legs it
ripped a sound from her she’d never heard before and couldn’t have even sworn was human.

Jamie couldn’t remember a time when he hadn’t fantasized about tasting Claire, making her come
undone with his mouth on her most intimate parts. Ever since she’d tasted him after her return from
Prague, though, the need had only intensified. Yes, he felt he needed to return the favor. But in
some deeper, more primitive way, it felt like an act of possession to him. He was claiming her as his
and she was allowing him to do so. The combination of power and humility was every bit as
intoxicating to him as he’d imagined. Her hands had found the back of his head and were urging
him closer, begging him to take more, and he smiled against her wetness and did just that. And the
sounds she made. Christ, would he ever get enough of her wee noises? He was just as greedy as
she was, though, and he decided to pull even more sounds from her as he plunged a finger inside her
while he continued to torture her with his mouth. What he got was his name in one long, drawn out
shriek that continued to increase in pitch (“Jaaaaaaaaaammmiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeee”), even as she
tried to stifle it by biting her shirt. He reached up with his free hand and yanked it out of her mouth,
pulling away just long enough to tell her, “It’s soundproof, Sassenach. No one can hear ye but me.
And I will hear ye scream for me.” With his finger still dancing inside her, he added another and
then dove back in with his mouth. Mere seconds passed before she was clenching around his
fingers, her nails digging into his scalp, her toes curling into his back, her entire body nearly lifting
off the desk as she indeed screamed for him, a sound that seemed to reverberate off the walls and
shoot straight into his cock.

While she was still trembling and pulsing from her release, in one motion he rose back onto his feet,
freed himself from his pants and drove into her. Then he stilled for a moment and allowed himself to
drown in the hazy passion of her golden eyes. There was a rightness here, a sense of completion he
hadn’t felt since the last time they’d been joined together this way. One at a time, he took his hands and stroked the sides of her face, pushing back her soft glorious curls and bringing his mouth to hers again, this time softly, almost reverently. And when he pulled back and began to move, he saw something answer in her eyes, something he hadn’t seen before. It was a longing that went deeper than the flesh and his soul filled to overflowing with joy that she was beginning to feel even a portion of what he felt for her.

Claire felt alight from the inside, could nearly feel the glow of every individual cell. Every stroke, every thrust reached past her womb and touched her heart and soul and spirit. She felt that incandescent glow stream out of her and into him and instead of diminishing her light it grew as she shared it with him. There were no more words exchanged; none were needed. The story of their passion and longing and aching was told with groans and sighs, with gazes and caresses, with color and light. When they went over the edge, they went together, and they clung to each other as a tree’s roots seek purchase in firm ground during a gale force wind. Even as they came back to reality and Claire prepared to leave, they couldn’t stop touching each other: a graze of fingers down an arm, tucking hair behind an ear, a whisper of lips across a forehead. They were imprinting one another on their skins, a shield and talisman for what was to come in the days ahead. “Good luck in Bolivia,” Jamie whispered to her as he held her once more before their parting. “And whatever comes after, we’ll deal with it together.” She nodded, then echoed his gesture from earlier and cupped his cheek with her hand. “Together,” she said firmly, and gave him a smile that stole his breath.

Joe and Claire parked their Humvee at the end of what could only be loosely described as a road near the base of Mount Illimani and got out, preparing their packs and equipment. They would have to go the rest of the way on foot. Claire fleetingly hoped her hours in the gym had prepared her for this, but she knew this was a different type of exertion than her usual. She internally shrugged and finished checking her gear. Then Joe surprised her by saying, “You know something, LJ? I’m proud of you.”

“For what?” Claire asked, looking up at him with a confused smile. “I’ve been around a while and I’ve seen a lot of agents,” he told her, still checking his own gear, “but you make it look easy.”

“Well, I have the best partner in the business,” she said sincerely. “That makes my job easy.”

“It’s not just that, though. I really admire your courage, your commitment to the job. I know that what we do isn’t for ourselves; it’s for the good of the country. But especially after what happened with Frank, for you to come back the way you did . . .”

Claire had turned away to hide her face, her emotions swirling and building the longer Joe went on. He had no idea that he wasn’t working for the good of the country at all, but instead for men like Randall who were only interested in increasing their own wealth and power. He had no idea the real reason why she’d returned to work after Frank was killed, nor that his employer was responsible for Frank’s death. Worst of all, she had no idea if this man she loved like a brother would ever forgive her once he found out she’d been lying to him for months, working to subvert their missions and potentially putting him in danger in the process. “Anyway, you ready?” he asked her. She swallowed hard past the lump in her throat, pasted a smile on her face, and said, “Yes. Let’s go.”

Hours later, the tracker indicated they were getting close to the coordinates they were looking for, the ones provided by Master Raymond’s clock. Both were tired and frustrated, though, feeling like they were on a wild goose chase. “What in the world are we doing out here, LJ?” Joe asked her. “I don’t know, but it feels like a total waste of time,” Claire answered, leaning over and placing her hands just above her knees and taking slow deep breaths. The altitude wasn’t making their hike any easier. “I
think we’re almost there, though. Wherever there is,” she told him with a shrug. When they reached the coordinates, they found nothing more than a patch of dirt, which meant their only option was to dig. Using the small folding shovels they brought along, they both got to work, becoming dirtier and more exhausted they longer they labored. Finally, Claire’s shovel hit something solid. They both started clearing dirt with their hands until they uncovered a metal plate in the ground. Claire’s eyes went wide as she stood back and saw the Order of Raymond’s symbol in the metal. They pried open the lid and Joe saved Claire’s life when she slipped down into the opening and almost fell down a deep chasm in the ground. There was a simple rope ladder down the side of the opening that disappeared into the blackness below. Claire and Joe looked at each other. Without speaking, they knew it was time for them to split up. “I’m going in,” Claire told him. “And I’m going to hike back out a bit until I can get connection on the satellite phone so I can call for support,” Joe told her. “Be careful, LJ.”

“You too,” she told him, then climbed onto the ladder and began her long descent. When she got to the bottom, there was only a dim light from up above, and she turned on the lamp on her forehead and headed further into the cave. The air was much cooler this deep below the mountain, but Claire shivered as much from the thought of what she might find as from the change in temperature. Sweeping her head lamp from side to side, she caught a glimpse of metal out of the corner of her eye. Heading toward the cave wall on that side, she used her hands and breath to blow away the dirt and found another, smaller metal cover with the Order of Raymond symbol on it. When she pulled back the lid, she found a leather folder covered in centuries of dust. She untied the leather cord holding it closed and found pages upon pages of documents. It looked like a journal, full of drawings and writings detailing Master Raymond’s works. This was what they’d come for, what they’d been trying to find. This could be the key to unlocking the mystery. Tamping down her excitement, she pulled out the equipment Jamie had given her before she left Inverness and started transmitting images of the pages. Once she finished that, she got on her radio and shouted to Joe, “I found it! Joe, do you copy? It’s Master Raymond’s journal, I found it!” His voice came back to her, the connection going in and out, but she clearly heard him say, “Claire, S Branch found us. They’re here! Malva’s here! Get out of there Claire, get out now!” Then she heard gunshots, followed by the most agonizing silence that had ever met her ears. “JOE! Joe, do you copy? JOE!”

Back at OB8, Randall was standing in the interrogation room with Dwyer, looking over his shoulder as he jotted down notes. “Have you finished with Claire’s results?” he asked. Dwyer looked up and told him simply, “I think we’ve found our mole.”

Claire ran with a burst of adrenaline back to the ladder. She had to get to Joe. And she would go through every S Branch operative to get to him if that was what it took. But when she reached the base of the ladder, she came face to face with Malva, who was pointing a gun directly at the center of Claire’s chest. Claire slid to a halt and said, her voice dripping with a barely contained hatred, “What did you do to Joe?” Malva, on the other hand, seemed distinctly unconcerned and almost bored when she said, “Put the book down.” When Claire didn’t answer and stood her ground, Malva took a few steps forward and repeated her command, “Put the book down.” Claire swung out and connected with Malva’s hand and the fight was on, the bag holding Master Raymond’s journal flying to the ground off to Claire’s left. They were, as always, almost evenly matched, and they traded dominance with neither managing to gain the upper hand. Finally, Claire connected with a kick to Malva’s midsection and she flew backwards but landed right next to her gun. Without a moment’s hesitation she raised the weapon and fired, a tight grouping of three bullets connecting with Claire’s torso. Claire collapsed to the ground with a groan of pain and Malva calmly walked over to the bag, picked it up, and started back up the ladder.
Claire didn’t know how long she had been lying on the cold cave floor when she came back to herself. She did know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that her bulletproof vest had just saved her life. The impact of the bullets against her ribcage still hurt terribly, but other than being stunned she was alright. She pulled herself to her feet and started back up the ladder after Malva. I must not have been down for too long, she thought to herself, because she could see Malva above her on the ladder without a terrible amount of distance between them. Claire felt like she was gaining on her adversary when she also got a stroke of luck in her favor: the strap of the bag holding the journal caught on the ladder and Malva had to spend a few precious moments trying to get herself free. When Claire got close enough, she grabbed Malva’s foot and started tugging. In all her years as an agent and in her extensive training, she had never fought an opponent on a ladder before. Up and down, back and forth, punching, kicking, grabbing, pulling whatever they could reach on the other. But with the higher position on the ladder for almost the entire fight, Malva had the advantage. And with one well-placed kick, Claire lost her hold and fell off the ladder, plunging back into the darkness of the cave below. Her mind flashed to Joe, then Jamie, as she fell into oblivion.
Killing and Saving

Chapter Summary

Thank you all SO MUCH for your kind words on the last chapter! Let’s go find out what’s happening with our spies!

Chapter Notes

The sections in italics are flashbacks.

Claire's MI-6 codename Nemesis is for the Greek goddess of retribution. Seemed fitting ;).

This time, when Claire awoke, the first thing she noticed was that she was upside-down. Somehow, her leg had gotten caught on the ladder just before she hit the bottom of the cave opening and she was dangling from it. The second thing she noticed was that there wasn’t a single millimeter of her body that didn’t hurt. Grunting and groaning in pain, she managed to pull herself upright and begin a slow and arduous ascent back to the surface. When she finally got there, after some undetermined amount of time had passed, she allowed herself the luxury of laying for a few moments on the ground and taking huge gulps of air. She rolled gingerly from her back to her stomach and raised her head to look around but didn’t see anyone. Pulling her radio from her back pocket, she shouted into it, “Joe? Joe, do you copy? Joe?” Nothing but static answered back. With the last strength she had, she pushed to her feet, grabbed her pack, and ran back the way she and Joe had hiked in. It felt like a dream, one where your feet are weighed down like concrete blocks and you run forever but never actually make any progress. She felt like she’d been hiking for hours but couldn’t tell if she was any closer to finding Joe. With every second that ticked by, the chances of finding him alive got smaller.

When Claire heard static, she held up the radio still clutched in her hand (if she held onto it, Joe couldn’t really be gone) but could tell right away it wasn’t coming from hers. Her eyes scanned along the trail and she found the source of the static. It was Joe’s radio. She scarcely had any time to be relieved by that discovery before her mouth dropped open in horror. Leading away from the radio and the path was a trail of blood. Part of her recoiled from following it, not wanting to face what she would find, her mind replaying the ghastly images of the blood in Frank’s apartment the night she found him dead. But she forced herself to go on, grasping onto any thin strand of hope that he hadn’t succumbed. It didn’t take long before she saw him, collapsed on his side on the hard ground, and she ran the rest of the way to him on a burst of adrenaline, shouting his name. She went to her knees beside him and rolled him onto his back. Her tears broke free when this motion pulled a groan from him. He was still alive. Again, her joy was short-lived as she pulled open his shirt and saw just how badly he was wounded. “Oh, you weren’t wearing your vest! Why weren’t you wearing your vest?” she said on a sob. Landing on his side had helped apply pressure to the wounds, but now that he was on his back the blood was flowing freely, the gushing river terrifying Claire. “You’re going to be ok, Joe,” she told him, willing it to be true. With one hand on his wounds, she used the other to pull her lifeline out of her bag.
“It’s a satcom phone,” Jamie had told her in the warehouse one day not long after they’d begun meeting there. “You can contact MI-6 from anywhere.”

“And just how do I explain to anyone at OB8 why I’m lugging around an MI-6-issue phone?” she asked him. She hadn’t been exaggerating about the lugging, either. Despite all the advances in phone technology over the years, the satcom phone was quite a beast. “Just don’t let anyone see it, aye?” he said as if the answer were abundantly obvious and she was a touch slow. Claire shook her head and said, “This is far too big, Jamie, I can’t take this.”


As far as Claire was concerned, the worst-case scenario had arrived. She knew she was taking a huge risk, but it couldn’t be helped. If she didn’t get Joe medical attention soon, he would bleed to death. Even if it meant getting exposed as a double agent, she had to do whatever it took to save him. She had no doubt he would do the same for her if the roles were reversed. She turned the phone on and pressed the button to connect to MI-6. “Base Ops. Base Ops. This is Nemesis. Do you copy? Over.” There was nothing but silence for a few beats as tears continued to stream unabated down her face. Then, “Nemesis, this is Base Ops. Go ahead, over.” At the repetition of her MI-6 code name, Joe weakly mumbled it out loud. She had to keep going now. She had no choice. Through her tears, she said, “I have a Code 6. I repeat, Code 6, I need emergency medevac, over.”

“Copy that, Nemesis. Launching extraction team. Pinpointing coordinates in three, two, one . . .”

“Set,” Claire replied. Joe had repeated her code name again, but she couldn’t worry about that now. She pulled her hand away from Joe’s chest momentarily and could barely process how much blood there was. Through her sobs, she kept repeating to him, “You’re going to be alright; you’re going to be alright; I’ve got you; I’ve got you.” Under her breath, she let her impatience leak out as she bounced a bit on her knees and said, “Come on, come on, come on,” willing the medevac to arrive sooner. The agony of minutes that felt like hours finally ended when Claire’s hair lifted and dust flew all around them, the helicopter’s downwash the sign of their salvation.

“Are ye alright?” Jamie asked Claire as he sat next to her in the back of an unmarked cargo van parked on a side street near the university in Inverness. “I’m fine,” Claire said, staring straight ahead. The lack of any inflection or emotion in her voice scared Jamie, but he understood it well. Claire’s working partnership with Joe, from what he’d gathered, was just like the innate trust and reliance he felt with Ian. It was far too easy to imagine what she was going through, and he said a silent prayer that he would never have to walk in her shoes. He’d already heard the basics of what had happened in Bolivia, including Claire’s confrontation with Malva. Jamie had never considered himself a vengeful man, but he was nearly overwhelmed with the desire to someday get five minutes alone in a room with Malva Christie (in the meantime, the punching bag in the gym had once again been the outlet for his aggression). Turning his attention back to Claire, he thought it might help her to keep talking, so he asked her, “What happened when the chopper came?”

“The MI-6 helicopter airlifted us to a hospital in La Paz,” Claire told him, letting her eyes drift closed as she remembered. “The whole flight I was thinking about Randall, what he might do when he found out, learning that I was betraying OB8 this whole time. And then I thought of a way out. I called Randall, told him I dragged Joe back to the Humvee, and that I drove him to the hospital myself. I couldn’t tell in his voice if he believed me; I think he did. They airlifted us back to Inverness. When we got here, they took us to Saint Andrew Hospital.”

“Good,” Jamie said with a small smile as she met his eyes. “No,” Claire shook her head in denial.
“It’s an OB8 hospital.”

She raced down the hall of the hospital, trailing behind the stretcher carrying Joe and the doctors treating him. Before the last doctor disappeared through the doors to the surgical wing, Claire asked him, “Is he going to be ok?”

“Have you been briefed on your cover story, Agent Beauchamp?” he asked, and she stared at him blankly. When he saw that no answer was forthcoming, he said, more slowly, “Agent Abernathy’s wife is here and will want to speak to you. Mr. Randall wanted to be sure you had been briefed on your cover story.”

“Yes, I know my cover story. IS MY PARTNER GOING TO LIVE?” Claire gritted out between clenched teeth. “We don’t know,” the doctor said simply, and turned and walked away.

“And then I had to lie to Gail. Joe’s wife,” Claire told Jamie, placing her hands on her forehead as she continued to relive those horrible moments.

“We were standing outside the bank’s offices in Paris,” Claire told Gail in a halting voice. The story wasn’t real, but every bit of the emotion Claire was feeling as she repeated it was. “A car pulled up and these men got out. They had guns. They started shouting that they wanted the bank’s computer codes; I had them in my briefcase. Your husband pushed me to the ground. I didn’t even see him get hit.” Gail was shaking her head as if she couldn’t believe that such violence had entered her world. “You just never think . . . something like this . . .” Claire reached out and touched her arm, both giving and receiving reassurance from the simple contact. “He’s going to make it. He’s strong. You should have seen him.”

“He WILL make it,” Jamie said firmly. Claire looked up at him, paused for a moment, then shook her head and said sadly, “You don’t know that. Joe was bleeding so much. I was afraid if I took my hand off his wound, he’d lose too much blood. So, I used the satcom phone right there in front of him.”

“You said he was barely conscious,” Jamie reminded her. There was little chance he would remember anything from the shooting if he woke up. But there was a chance, and Claire knew it as well as Jamie did. “He heard me. He repeated my code name twice. I would suggest you put operatives in the hospital, just in case for when he regains consciousness . . .” she trailed off and Jamie finished her thought for her. “But it’s an OB8 hospital.” There was nothing they could do. They were simply going to have to hope that Joe’s mind would fail to hold onto the details of Claire’s conversation on the MI-6 satcom phone. Jamie could hardly bear the hopelessness in Claire’s face, the heaviness in the slump of her shoulders. “He WILL make it,” he told her again, willing her to believe it. When she didn’t respond, he slipped his arm around her shoulders and lightly tugged her closer to his side.

For a few precious minutes, she rested her head on his shoulder and allowed herself to simply breathe; she had spent all her tears, for the moment. She breathed in the scent of him and allowed it to surround her, to calm her, to soothe her. And in that moment, she felt something inside her shift and fall and then settle. Her heart was his. She felt it as surely and strongly as she felt his arm around her, his breath stirring in her hair. It was familiar and completely new all at once. She knew that she had loved Frank with all her heart. But it was almost as if Jamie had created new places in her heart, that he had expanded it beyond its standard four chambers. There were parts of her being that had been waiting for him, that only came into existence when he entered her life. If she was completely honest with herself, she’d been sliding toward this moment since the first time she’d sat across from him in his office with her flaming red hair dye. There was nothing about her future that was certain; she wasn’t even certain how much of a future she had. Whatever she had, though, he
would be in it. Of that, she was certain.

At the same time Jamie and Claire were having their meeting, Jonathan Randall was having a meeting in his office with Craig Dwyer, looking through a stack of paperwork related to Claire’s functional imaging test. When he looked up, he pinned Dwyer with his hardest glare and said, “You’re in a very difficult position, Mr. Dwyer. You’ve been sent to OB8 to find a mole. The Federation must be pressuring you.”

“I’m just doing my job,” Dwyer said calmly. “We both are,” Randall answered back without missing a beat. “And when I look at Claire Beauchamp’s test results, I don’t see a single spike.” Dwyer was equally as firm when he responded, “She’s guilty. She’s the one.”

Undeterred, but frustrated, Randall raised his voice slightly and said, “I think that’s a dangerous accusation being made by a desperate man.”

“I’m not desperate, Mr. Randall, but I am curious,” Dwyer said, cocking his head to the side and looking across the desk inquisitively. “Why do you feel the need to defend Miss Beauchamp?”

“I don’t. I don’t need to defend her. The results defend her,” Randall said simply, touching the papers in front of him for emphasis. “The results are too perfect,” Dwyer told him. “We all have our specialty. This is mine. With all due respect, Mr. Randall, you’re ignoring the facts. Claire Beauchamp has made numerous mistakes, not the least of which was her most recent mission. Her partner was nearly killed. She could have retrieved Master Raymond’s journal, which is now in S Branch hands. Claire Beauchamp is the mole. If you don’t follow protocol on this, I’m going to The Federation.” He stood up and walked towards the door, stopping just short of it when Randall said his name. Calmly. Coldly. He turned back. “Don’t do a damn thing,” Randall told him. “I’ll take care of Beauchamp.” Dwyer nodded his agreement and walked out without another word.

Claire was in the briefing room at OB8 the next day with Randall. Patrick Russell was joining them, taking over many of Joe’s responsibilities while he was still fighting for his life in the hospital. Randall was showing them a video of a bank robbery in Manchester on the monitors behind him. When he paused the video, Randall told them the robbers worked for Yousef al-Ashar. Claire was flabbergasted. “Why would al-Ashar rob a bank in the UK?”

“That bank controlled his assets, recently frozen by Her Majesty’s government. The men you see here were simply a distraction. While they were taking money from the tellers, two other men were electronically transferring al-Ashar’s money so he could access it.” Just then, Lamb walked into the room to join the briefing, taking a seat across from Claire. Randall nodded his head in acknowledgement of Lamb’s entrance and then picked up where he’d left off. “We’ve put up with al-Ashar for years, mainly because he gave us good intel. Now he’s closing shop, relocating, and we don’t know where. He’s been missing for two weeks.” Lamb added, “al-Ashar is too dangerous to trust as a free agent. Now it’s our job to bring him to justice.” Claire met his eyes across the table and had to stop herself from rolling hers. She had no idea what OB8’s motives were but bringing al-Ashar to justice was certainly not one of them. “Where did al-Ashar re-route the money?” Russell asked.

“That’s what we need to find out,” Randall told him. “If we don’t steal back his fortune, he could use that money to buy protection in the Middle East. If he does that, he could partner with a hostile country and provide them with all the arms they will ever need.” Turning back towards the monitors, Randall pulled up a surveillance picture of a very well-dressed man. “Lucio Javetti. He’s
an accountant for al-Ashar. He’s known for throwing lavish parties at his villa in Milan. He entertains heads of state, diplomats, celebrities. He’s having a party on Friday night. Claire, you’ll be there. Since Joe’s in recovery you’ll be going in alone. We have no ‘in’ to the party, so you won’t be on the guest list.” With a firm shake of her head, Claire responded confidently, “It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Your mission is to retrieve al-Ashar’s offshore account number from Javetti’s computer. You will dead drop the information in Sempione Park, which is only five miles from the party,” Randall told her. “When do I leave?” she asked. “Tonight,” he replied.

At the outdoor seating area of a café in Inverness, Jamie and Claire sat at separate but adjacent tables so they could talk without giving the appearance of being together. Claire had already given Jamie the details from the briefing about her latest mission, which had him shaking his head. “OB8 doesn’t want to bring al-Ashar to justice. They want revenge,” he told her. “Revenge for what?” she asked him, confused. Jamie explained, “When OB8 sold that nuclear weapon to al-Ashar and you snuck in and stole the core back, he thought he was being double-crossed, that only OB8 would have known he had it and where it was.”

“Oh God,” Claire groaned. Sometimes it was easy for her to forget that her work as a double agent had consequences that went far beyond her own life. Jamie continued, “So last week, al-Ashar sold OB8 ten Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. They wanted to fortify their base in Saudi Arabia. Al-Ashar had a good laugh- he took the money and ran, didn’t deliver.” Claire could easily imagine how such a slight would have infuriated Randall, how desperate he would be for vengeance. “So OB8 wants to send out a message to everyone else they do business with, ye ken?” Jamie finished. Claire knew exactly what that message was: “Don’t mess with OB8.”

“Now, MI-6 actually wants to bring al-Ashar to justice. We also want OB8 to have that money,” Jamie told her. “Why?” Claire asked. “So we can tag the accounts and follow the money, see what they spend it on. It will give us a profile into how OB8 does their banking. Take this,” he told her, holding a small black box down low next to his chair that he pressed into her palm when her arm swung casually down next to her own chair. “Attach it to the top of the OB8 retrieval device. It will make a copy of whatever you get from Javetti’s computer.” Claire slipped the device into her bag and said, “Ok.” As difficult as it usually was to focus on work around her, Jamie thought he was doing a good job getting Claire ready for her counter-mission during their meeting. But his senses were so highly tuned to her that he could feel something was wrong the entire time they’d been talking. And something about the tone of her voice when she’d uttered that simple ‘ok’ had him absolutely convinced. Something else was bothering her, something she hadn’t told him. “Are ye ok, Sassenach?” he asked her gently. Taking a deep breath, Claire began, “I was getting briefed by Ned. He was showing me the tech I needed for the operation in Milan. Randall came in while we were talking and asked me to come see him when we were done.”

“I should start with your test results,” Randall told her once she was sitting across from him in his office a short time later. “You passed just fine. Your numbers were normal.”

“I’d hope so,” Claire told him with a smile. She was genuinely relieved but schooled her face to make the whole thing look like no big deal, like she’d known she was going to pass all along. Randall said, “I know what a difficult time this is. I understand. Joe being in the hospital . . .”

“Have you heard anything?” she asked eagerly. “Yes, he’s still unconscious. They’re not sure how bad it is,” Randall answered, and Claire dropped her eyes to her lap to hide the rush of her emotions. The longer Joe stayed unconscious, the slimmer his chances were of ever waking up.
Randall stood to pour himself a glass of water and said to her, “Look, Claire. I don’t blame you for not talking to me the way you used to, before hating me; since what happened with Frank. Please believe me when I tell you it was the last thing I wanted, the last thing. I begged Security Section not to take that action.”

“No, you didn’t,” Claire ground out, her whole body seething with rage. She had gone from worry for Joe to pulsing anger in seconds. Did anything ever come out of Randall’s mouth that wasn’t a complete lie? As if he’d reached inside her mind and pulled out her thoughts, he said as he went back and sat down, “You don’t have to believe me.”

“Why would you try to stop what you had ordered?” Claire asked him. This time, she made no attempt to control the venom in her eyes. If he truly believed that she hated him already, she lost nothing by showing him just how much. She was completely unprepared for his answer. “Because of you. I always knew there was something about you, from the first time I saw you . . .”

“A lot can change in seven years,” Claire muttered, almost to herself. “It’s been a lot longer than seven years,” Randall told her, shocking her yet again. “I’ve known your uncle for years. I met him in London at MI-6 Headquarters. I’ve known you since you were a child. I’ve kept tabs on you. I’ve checked in, in my own way. I’ve always thought of you as family, like my own flesh and blood. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know. Before you went away.” Reeling, Claire tried to end the conversation as quickly as possible and get out of Randall’s office.

“It’s almost like he was saying goodbye,” Claire told Jamie slowly, her mind still in chaos from what Randall had told her. “It’s like he knew that I’m not coming back.” Jamie felt chilled to the bone despite the warm day. It took every ounce of strength he possessed not to simply drag Claire out of the café and send her into protective custody, whether she wanted to go or not. Since he knew he would have one hell of a fight on his hands if he tried it, he opted for reassurance. “Claire, yer going to be alright. We’re going to get through this. Just contact me as soon as ye get back.”

“I know,” she told him. “With those account numbers.” Now Jamie wanted to shake her for her ridiculous stubbornness, her blindness to what was right in front of her eyes. Did she not understand yet? Did she not see that she carried his heart in her hands? They were going to have to lay some things on the table between them. SOON. In the meantime, he told her in his firmest voice, “I mean with or without the account numbers, ye wee fool. Just as soon as ye get back.”

“Ok,” she told him, and this time her voice sounded more like her. “Ok,” he returned. Since they’d both already paid, Claire left first. Jamie lingered a bit longer, his mind playing back through all she’d just told him. Randall was clearly dangerous and possibly delusional as well. What could his motive have been, keeping track of Claire all those years? Though Jamie’s mind swirled with questions, he couldn’t allow himself to lose focus. He wasn’t going into the field with her, but he was going to do anything and everything he could from his end to keep Claire safe.

An OB8 security officer entered Jonathan Randall’s office and said, “You wanted to see me?” He waited for a few moments but there was no answer, Randall staring off into space. He wasn’t even sure he’d been heard, so he said, “Sir?” Randall finally made eye contact with him and said, “Yes. I need to send a communique to the OB4 office in Florence, attention Spirelli. Put it out through Server Five.” Notebook and pen in hand, the security officer took detailed notes of Randall’s instructions and responded, “Yes, sir.”

“I’m ordering, with Security Section full knowledge, the assassination of an OB8 officer. Method, close range hit. This officer is scheduled to make a dead drop at Sempione Park in Milan at 10 pm tomorrow. That’s when the kill should take place.” Randall’s hands were steepled on his desk but
there was no emotion in his voice. He sounded as if he’d just placed an order for takeout. The
security officer wasn’t nearly as calm, his discomfort clearly written across his face, but he had a job
to do, and it wasn’t to ask questions. Continuing to write down the information, he simply repeated,
“Yes, sir.”

“The target’s name is Beauchamp. Claire Beauchamp.”
Chapter Summary

Somebody is in some serious trouble! Seems like a good time for the two men in Claire's life to meet up again, don't you think? A huge THANK YOU to everyone who continues to comment and leave kudos and love for this story - it really helps!

Claire took a moment while she floated through the warm Italian night, her parachute billowing overhead, to marvel at the odd adventure that was her life. As much as she craved normalcy, as much as she desired to defeat OB8 and leave the spy business behind forever, there were parts that she would certainly miss. There weren't very many people, after all, who got to spend their Friday night jumping out of an airplane to sneak into an exclusive party in an Italian villa. Once she landed on the grounds of the estate, however, these thoughts emptied from her head as she focused all her attention on the job at hand. As soon as her feet hit the ground, she released her parachute then peeled herself out of her jump suit to reveal the short black lace cocktail dress underneath. With a matching sleek black wig and tall black boots, she easily blended with the invited guests as she glided unnoticed into the pool area where many of the guests were lingering. She scanned the scene, her eye quickly landing on Javetti, who was distracted by the two women vying for his attention. Biding her time, she remembered Ned's instructions before she'd left Inverness. She had to get her hands on something Javetti touched. Ned's device, disguised as a cell phone, would then make a duplicate of Javetti's fingerprint so she could get into his office.

Claire got the chance she needed when Javetti decided to settle the low-level dispute between the two women by taking both inside, leaving his brandy snifter on the table next to where he'd been standing. She waited until he'd entered the villa and then made her way smoothly but quickly over to the table. She couldn't take the chance that an efficient member of the staff would whisk the glass away; she only had enough liquid latex in the fingerprint device to make one duplicate. Pulling the counterfeit cell phone out of her small evening bag, she waved it over the surface of the glass to scan the fingerprint. Then she went inside and down the stairs, following the route she'd committed to memory from the architect's plans of the house. Once outside the office door, she opened the phone and placed the latex duplicate of Javetti's fingerprint on her index finger. When she held it up to the scanner, she breathed a sigh of relief when the sensor recognized the print and disengaged the security measures. Down another flight of stairs, she found Javetti's computer and pulled out both the OB8 and MI-6 devices she'd been given to copy his hard drive. As the devices collected the data, Claire was cautiously optimistic. Maybe, for the first time in a long time, she was going to have a mission go off without a hitch.

Standing in the common area outside his office, Jamie was discussing an intelligence brief with a colleague when he heard his brother-in-law shouting his name. "Jamie! Beauchamp’s been made. 10 pm tonight, Sempione Park. They’re going to kill her." Ian was waving a piece of paper in front of Jamie’s face, the intercepted OB8 communique that was Claire’s death warrant. For a moment, he was speechless as a tidal wave of emotions swept over him. It was exactly as they’d feared. Jamie clenched his hands into fists, the desire to hunt down Jonathan Randall and subject him to a slow and agonizing death a fearsome hurricane blowing through him. Calm. He had to be calm. He had to be clear-headed and rational and all the things his heart was screaming against because it was the
only way to save Claire. And he would save Claire. That single focus immediately centered him, and it was only then that he realized Ian was still speaking to him. “Did ye hear me? OB8 is going to kill Claire. I tried to find Murtagh but he’s not in his office.” Jamie didn’t take the time to respond as he picked up the phone and called Field Ops. “It’s Fraser. We need an extraction team assembled in Italy. No, Milan, NOW. We only have two hours.” He hung up and told Ian, “I need to tell Murtagh.” Ian repeated, “I just told ye, he’s not in his office.” Without even pausing, Jamie said hurriedly over his shoulder, “I’m going to find him. Get me Lambert Beauchamp on the phone!”

Claire grabbed both devices as soon as all the data was collected from Javetti’s hard drive. Back up the first staircase, out the office door, down the hall. She’d almost made it to the staircase leading back to the main floor when one of Javetti’s hired security guards stopped her. “This floor is off-limits to guests,” he said in a heavy Italian accent. Claire responded, purposely drawing out her words, “Well, I don’t know about all that. I do know that I absolutely love this house. Except for the spinning. Can you do something about the spinning?” During this speech she’d leaned heavily against the wall and closed her eyes but pulled one eye open again so she could peer at the guard blarely. “I think I’m going to need a bathroom,” she told him. “It’s up the stairs and to the right,” he said, pointing the direction. Claire bulged out her eyes, threw her hand over her mouth, gagged once, and ran past the guard up the stairs, mumbling a ‘thank you’ behind her hand as she went. Shaking her head at how often fake intoxication got her out of trouble, Claire took her stolen data and strolled calmly out of the villa into the Italian night.

After briefing Murtagh, Jamie was heading toward Field Ops to check on the progress of the extraction team when his cell phone rang. “Fraser,” he said crisply, preparing to make the conversation brief. “It’s me,” Lamb said, instantly garnering Jamie’s full attention. “I’m on a secure line so we can speak freely.” Jamie wasted no time with pleasantries. “There’s been a hit put out on Claire. I’m getting her out of there.”

“Not yet,” Lamb responded after pausing a second to process the news. “You could be making a mistake.” It seemed like a nearly identical conversation to the one they’d had when Claire was trapped in Prague and Jamie had even less patience for it now. He wasn’t willing to risk Claire’s life on ‘could be.’ “I don’t think so,” he shot back. “Do nothing until you hear from me,” Lamb told him, and when Jamie started explaining that they already had an extraction team in route, Lamb hung up. “Ifrinn!” Jamie shouted while staring at his phone, causing several analysts to poke their heads out of their cubicles. Claire clearly came by her stubbornness honestly. Whatever Lambert Beauchamp was going to do, he needed to do it quickly. If it came down to the wire, Jamie would have no hesitation to order the extraction. Jamie said a quick prayer of protection for Claire and wisdom for himself as he continued down the hall to Field Ops.

Once he arrived, he checked in with Ian and Graham, the tech officer on duty in the surveillance room. Images of the park appeared on all the video monitors in the room from various cameras. “Ok, the team is in place in Sempione Park. Six armed officers are stationed and waiting,” Graham reported to Jamie and Ian. “One is by the fountain, two at the southern entrance, one at the western gate, and two snipers at the north end. All are standing by awaiting Beauchamp’s arrival; at the first sighting, we take her to safety.”

“Good,” Jamie nodded, the ball of anxiety in his stomach releasing slightly now that he could see the team in place. Claire would not be alone no matter what happened, and even though every cell in his body was screaming about not being there to protect her himself, this was the next best thing. “Are they still scanning for gunmen?” Jamie asked Graham. “Yes, sir. Scan is complete, no shooters
have been identified,” Graham responded, his crisp efficiency adding another layer of comfort for Jamie. Everyone here knew their job and was trained to the utmost to do it well. “We also have three operatives surrounding the park on lookout.” As they continued to watch the monitors and receive updates from the team in the park, to the three men’s complete surprise, Lamb walked in the room, followed immediately by Murtagh.

As soon as he’d hung up on Jamie, Lamb went straight to Ned’s office to check the outgoing message logs, using a cover story that he’d attempted to send a message to another OB office that hadn’t gone through. Ned showed him the logs for all the servers except Server Five. When he’d asked to check that one also, Ned looked at him strangely but complied with his request. He scanned the log and as soon as he saw the message in question, he’d known exactly what Randall was doing. As he charged into the Field Ops surveillance room, he said, “Call them off.” Jamie immediately shot back, “Did you read Randall’s transmission? Claire will be in the park any minute.”

“No execution has been ordered. This is a setup,” Lamb told him. “What are you talking about?” Jamie asked incredulously, wondering why he’d even bothered getting Claire’s uncle involved. “Randall’s transmission was sent out on OB8 Server Five. It was only sent out to you. Jamie, they know someone is listening. This is a test.”

“Aye. I’ll tell you what- we’ll take that chance, get Claire out of there, and we’ll argue about this later.”

“If you go in like this, if you pull her out, it will only prove that you’ve intercepted Randall’s communique and Claire will be exposed.”

“You don’t know that for a fact!” Jamie shouted. “Why am I even talking to you?” Lamb asked, exasperated, his patience at an end. “Murtagh, abort this mission,” Lamb said, no longer addressing Jamie directly. “Wait a minute!” Jamie raised his voice again, inserting himself back into the conversation, refusing to be shut out. At the same time, Murtagh said, “Lamb, we’ve verified this order. If we pull back, you could be killing your niece.”

“You’re killing her if you don’t!” Lamb said, raising his voice for the first time. “How could you be willing to risk something like this?” Jamie asked him, all his anxiety back in full force and nearly strangling him in its intensity. He could not risk Claire. He could not. How could he make Lamb see it? Lamb said, looking at Jamie and Murtagh in turn, “If Claire makes her scheduled dead drop, does it successfully, and leaves the park, she will have proven herself loyal to OB8.” Everyone in the room was silent, looking at each other, until Murtagh looked at Ian and said, “Have them hold until we give an order.”

“No, no no, no, hold it. Hold it,” Jamie said to Ian, who already had his headset on and was communicating with the team in Milan. “This is Claire’s life!”

“You were meant to see that transmission. You’re the only ones who saw it!” Lamb told him again. “Someone in that park IS GOING TO KILL HER if we don’t do anything!” Jamie shouted back. It was the only thing he could think, the only thing he could see. “I know how Randall thinks. He’s bluffing,” Lamb said, simply but with force. Ian looked between Jamie and Lamb, who were staring each other down. For a few minutes, silence filled the room except for the chatter of communication between the team members on the ground. Tension crackled in the air. Whatever was about to happen, they were going to watch it all play out in front of them. Finally, Graham broke the silence and said simply, “Beauchamp is entering the park.” All of them stared at the monitors and watched as Claire walked into the park, moving calmly and confidently toward her dead drop point. From another camera pointing at the opposite end of the park, they spotted a man in a dark trench coat walking in Claire’s direction.
“Who’s this guy in the jacket?” Graham asked, and the team on the ground was instantly on alert. One of the team members whispered into the com on his lapel, “Position three. We have a potential incoming hostile.” The agent sitting on the edge of the fountain reached into his briefcase and put his hand on his weapon. The snipers got the potential target in their sights through their scopes and reported back on distance and wind speed. Claire, oblivious to all the activity, continued toward her dead drop point, a literal stroll in the park. Back in Field Ops, Ian said, “This could be it. This could be our guy. This could be the hit. What are we doing?” Jamie looked up and said, pleading, “Lamb, promise me yer not wrong about this.” Without looking away from Claire on the monitor, Lamb said quietly, “Hold your position.” As they watched, the man approaching Claire reached into his jacket pocket. “He could be going for a gun,” Ian said, and Graham communicated to the team, “Prepare to take him out.”

“Stand by,” Jamie gritted out, feeling like he could barely breathe. He could see just as much anxiety on Lamb’s face as he knew was clearly written across his own. Claire and the unknown man approached each other. Ten feet, then five, then two. No one in the surveillance room moved or spoke. At the last moment, the man in the coat moved away from Claire to her left, and she made her dead drop in the trash can to her right and kept walking. “Ok, she’s out. She’s out of the park. She’s clear,” Graham said, releasing a large exhale that everyone in the room seemed to share. Lamb closed his eyes for a moment then opened them again and looked at Jamie, jaw still clenched but slowly releasing. Murtagh said, “Good work, Lamb,” who nodded in acknowledgement and walked out of the room, clearly drained from the experience. Despite all his insistence and bravado, Jamie knew he’d been scared, too. It made the risk they’d taken at his insistence only slightly easier to bear. Ian took off his jacket, threw it on the chair behind him, and said breathlessly, “I feel like I just lost thirty pounds. I kid ye not.” Jamie agreed, also feeling like he’d lost thirty years from his life expectancy. He needed Claire. He was nearly shaking with it. Since that option was currently unavailable to him, and since he had to let out the pent-up emotions of the day somehow, it was time to go to the gym for another session with the punching bag.

Across town in another office in Inverness, another interested party had also watched the scene unfold in Sempione Park. And Jonathan Randall felt a quiet thrill of pride flow through him as Claire completed her dead drop, justifying his faith in her, showing herself loyal. Craig Dwyer, however, was furious when he found out, and let Randall know the next time he saw him in his office. “What the hell kind of stunt was that, Randall? You know what, it doesn’t even matter. Beauchamp’s other employer obviously knew the message was bogus.”

“Whatever organization is working with the mole, if she was their agent, they would have stopped her,” Randall insisted. To him, the outcome of the operation in Milan eliminated any remaining doubt about Claire possibly being the mole. “If she was, they would have saved her life and you would have essentially let her go,” Dwyer told him, still fuming. He knew The Federation was going to be seriously displeased as well. Randall stood up behind his desk, leaned forward on his hands, and said, “It’s irrelevant because that’s not what happened. So, I suggest you keep looking for the mole, Dwyer, and stop questioning every decision I make.” Then he walked out of his office and headed for the briefing room to meet Claire and Russell to prep them for their next assignment.
Succumbing and Reviving

Chapter Summary

Jamie's still feeling a bit emotional after last week (the punching bag can't solve every problem, right?). I bet we know something that might help with that! (So yes, that means this chapter is NSFW ;))

“We’ve analyzed the information you collected from Javetti’s computer,” Randall told Claire and Russell in the briefing room. “The good news is we have the bank information we need. The bad news is we don’t have the account numbers.”

“So, what computer do we need to access now?” Claire asked, feeling exasperated. The mission had been flawless, and they still didn’t have what they needed to be able to get to al-Ashar’s money. “The account numbers aren’t on a computer at all,” Randall answered surprisingly. “al-Ashar apparently refuses to store his bank account numbers on any computer. It eliminates the possibility of hacking.”

“Where are they stored?” Russell enquired. “They are in a safe deposit box at different bank. This one is in Switzerland. Claire, you will be going in with Russell since Joe is still in the hospital. You will be Christina Stephen, Drescher Diamonds, looking for a bank to recommend to your clients for high-volume storage.” As he wrapped up the briefing and was preparing to exit the room, Randall walked up behind Claire’s chair, put his hand on her shoulder, and bent low to speak into her ear. “Great job in Milan,” he whispered, and Claire fought to resist the urge to shake off his touch and vomit. After she got her tech briefing from Ned, she left to set up her next meeting with Jamie at the warehouse so she could find out her counter-mission.

From the moment she walked into the warehouse that night, Claire knew that something had happened while she was in Milan. Jamie was pacing, wearing a hole in the concrete floor waiting for her to appear. When she stepped into view, he froze in his tracks and pinned her in place with a look from his piercing blue eyes that she felt all the way to her bones. It was raw, primal, full of a need that was almost painful in its intensity. She couldn’t speak, could barely breathe, her heart pounding madly in her chest. Jamie didn’t speak either. Like a hunter who’d caught sight of his prey, he moved toward her with purpose and nearly kissed her off her feet, the explosion of his mouth on hers obliterating all other thoughts from her mind. Whatever had happened, whatever had caused the mood he was in, Claire could do nothing but respond to him and the passion that flooded her system as soon as she entered his presence. The entire world reduced to a small, sharp, throbbing point made entirely of sensations. The tingling press of his lips against hers. The back-and-forth battle of their tongues, a war with no losers. The imprint of his fingers into the flesh of her hips (an imprint would surely be there tomorrow, and she welcomed it gladly). He backed her up against the section of chain-link fencing behind her and breathed out, almost incoherently, “I need . . . I need ye, Sassenach. Now.”

“Yes, now. Oh God, Jamie, now.” As soon as he was done working on her pants, she was working on his, their mouths clashing and desperate as they raced to be joined as one again. Jamie hoisted her up to wrap around him and buried himself inside her with a force that ripped a scream of astounded
pleasure from Claire. She reached behind her and wrapped her hands through the links of the fencing, using it to lift herself up and down on him, meeting each thrust, showing him that whatever needy thing had broken loose in him existed equally in her. His hands were gripping her arse and now he was punctuating each press of his flesh into hers with a stream of words, some English, some Gaelic. “Ye are mine, mo neihan donn. Mine, now and forever. I willna lose you, Claire. I willna let you be taken from me, mo graidh. I canna watch you die. Ye canna leave me.” Claire fought through the haze of the titanic release building in her system and stilled, releasing her hands from the fencing and bringing them on each side of Jamie’s face. She ran one hand through his curls, wiped the light sheen of sweat from his forehead with the other, and said in a choked voice, “Jamie, look at me.”

His eyes met hers and his knees nearly buckled with the weight of what he saw in the golden depths of her gaze. It was as if the Claire he saw in his dreams, the one who looked at him with love and trust and commitment and forever, had suddenly materialized and joined with reality. With tears sliding down her cheeks, she said, “I am yours. And I am not going anywhere. You won’t lose me, Jamie, I promise.” He leaned his forehead into hers as he started moving again, reaching as deeply inside her as their bodies would allow. “Say it again, Sassenach. Tell me yer mine,” he breathed over her parted lips. And when she smiled against his mouth, his own tears began and melded with hers. “I am yours, Jamie Fraser. For as long as you’ll have me.” When their lips met this time, it was somehow like the first time all over again, full of wonder and newness and joy. The swirl of emotions drove them even faster towards release, and Claire shuddered and gasped as she tightened around Jamie just seconds before he moaned her name and emptied himself inside her. She slid down his body and leaned against him, her legs shaky as a newborn colt. When she’d found her breath again, she looked up at him, cocked her head to the side, and said, “Now what’s all this about watching me die?”

“So, it was a trap?” Claire asked after Jamie told her briefly of what happened during her mission in Milan behind the scenes, the currents swirling around her of which she’d been blissfully unaware. She sat between his legs the whole time, her back pressed against his chest, his arms wrapped tightly around her, his resonant voice stoking the embers of her desire anew even as she listened. Despite the subject matter, she’d never felt safer. “Yes, it was,” he told her, although the way he tightened his hold said he still couldn’t quite fully believe it himself. Jamie felt as though his body, mind, and soul had been through a tornado in recent days. The fact that the woman he loved was whole and alive and safe in the circle of his arms (and that maybe, just maybe, she loved him in return) was a wonder beyond comprehension. The only thing that could make his joy complete was if he didn’t have to let her go at the end of their meeting. It would happen someday, Jamie promised himself. Claire, who’d dropped into his life out of nowhere, was meant to be his. And she was meant to be his in the light of day as well as in the dark of night. “If you’d pulled me out, Randall would have known I was the mole,” Claire said, and she felt Jamie nod next to her face. She turned her head toward him, perplexed, and said, “But I would have been safe. He gave me an out.”

“He kept tabs on ye, remember? Thought of you as his own flesh and blood,” Jamie said dryly. “Ugh, don’t remind me,” Claire shuddered, although she was grateful to see a glimpse of Jamie’s sense of humor returning. What he’d been through in her absence had clearly impacted him deeply. She thought of another question and asked him, “How did you know not to step in?”

“It was yer uncle,” Jamie told her, and watched as her eyes widened in surprise. “He figured the truth, that Randall was setting us up.” Claire hadn’t forgotten about the hidden codes in her uncle’s books, all the reasons she still had to doubt his loyalties. But she clearly owed him. With all the thoughts churning through her mind, one of the most prominent caused her face to fall. “What?” Jamie asked, and Claire couldn’t help but smile a little through the downturn in her mood. He was
so in tune with her, could sense her emotions so well. It would be disconcerting if she didn’t trust him so implicitly. “It’s going to take forever to bring them down,” Claire told him with a sigh. She felt like she was climbing a mountain whose summit she couldn’t even see, let alone reach. The feeling was even more acute when she considered that anywhere outside the warehouse, being in the position she was in with Jamie at that moment would seal both of their fates. “Well, this might help a little,” he said, and released his hold on her with one arm to reach into his jacket pocket. He pulled out a small device and handed it to her as she asked, “What is it?”

“It’s a transmitter,” he replied. “We’ll be able to hear everything you’re saying in Switzerland. When you open the safe deposit box, read the account numbers out loud.”

“OB8 will get them at the same time,” Claire reminded him. Jamie shook his head and told her, “It doesn’t matter. We’ll tag the account numbers right there and track every move OB8 makes.” Anticipating her reaction once again, he added, “I ken, Sassenach. It’s not exactly a crushing blow.” As they so often did, though, they switched roles. Now it was Claire’s turn to encourage him. “Every bit helps,” she told him with a smile, and leaned forward to gently press her lips to his. She quickly pulled away despite his groan of protest, knowing she couldn’t linger any longer and couldn’t risk going another round with him (while every fiber of her being wanted nothing more than to crawl in his lap and do just that). She got to her feet, helped him up, and shared a few more blood-stirring kisses with him before she left to get ready for her trip to Switzerland.

Claire (no, not today, today she was Christina Stephen from Drescher Diamonds) walked into the bank in Geneva and waited for the manager to come and meet her for their appointment. As they walked through the bank and down to the lower level, they discussed climate control in the building, insurance, emergency power, all the things someone in Christina’s position would need to pass on to her clients. When they reached the main vault with the safe deposit boxes, Claire reached into her bag and pulled out the small container of spray she’d gotten from Ned before she left Inverness. With a silent apology to the manager, she turned and sprayed him in the face, rendering him unconscious in seconds. She watched him fall to the floor and then said, “Ok Russell, I’m in.” Although it took her mind a moment to adjust to the fact that Joe wasn’t the one on the other end of her com, she shelved that distraction in seconds as Russell said, “Alright, Claire, al-Ashar’s box number is 5947. Standing by for your ready.” Claire scanned the wall looking for the correct box. When she found it, she flipped a switch on the spray canister and sprayed the locks on the outside of the box, obliterating them in moments. She then easily flipped the door open and slid the box out, lifting the lid and rifling through the contents until she found a small white card. “Russell, I’m ready, I have the account numbers.”

“Copy that. Go, Claire,” he replied, and she read the numbers aloud to him, knowing that MI-6 was listening through the transmitter she’d gotten from Jamie. Once Russell read the numbers back to her to confirm the information, she closed the box and slid it back into the wall. It stopped just short, a portion of the box still protruding from its resting place. She pulled it back and tried again, but it still wouldn’t go back to its original position. “Claire, get out of there. What’s happening?” Russell asked. “Hold on, just having a bit of a problem,” Claire told him, then looked up sharply when she heard footsteps coming in her direction. If she couldn’t fix the box, she would have to create a distraction in order to escape. And then she realized she already had one: the bank manager. She went and knelt beside him on the floor of the vault and as the security guard walked in, she looked up frantically and said, “Please help me! He just fainted!” As the guard came to kneel beside her, she rose and quickly walked out of the vault, saying as she went, “I’m going to go call an ambulance!” She was already out of the bank by the time the guard noticed the safe deposit box still protruding from the wall.
“It’s an anomaly, sir,” Ned said in the OB8 office in Inverness the next day. “While Claire was in the bank vault in Switzerland there was definitely another transmission, not one of ours. I picked it up in signals intelligence. It’s just . . . you wanted me to tell you if there was anything unusual. I didn’t just get someone in trouble, did I?” Craig Dwyer looked up from the papers Ned had given him a few minutes before and smiled. But it was a chilling smile, one that did nothing to untie the knots in Ned’s stomach, merely adding to their number and coiling them more tightly. Dwyer got up without a word, papers in hand, and walked straight into Jonathan Randall’s office. Saying nothing, he placed the papers in Randall’s hands, letting him see the latest evidence for himself and form his own conclusions. Randall scanned his eyes over the documents, looked up at Dwyer and gave a small nod, his lips pursed in a frown. It was time to get rid of their mole problem. Permanently.

The shrill ring of a phone pulled Claire out of sleep that night and she fumbled through the darkness to find its source on her nightstand. After she found it and mumbled a hello in a sleep-drenched voice, she heard Gail’s voice on the other end saying her name. Everything inside her immediately tensed in fear until she heard the two sweetest words she’d ever heard in any language: “He’s awake.”

A short time later, despite the hour, Claire was dressed and walking down the hall of Saint Andrew Hospital beside Gail, who was filling her in on the details of Joe’s return to the land of the living. While they walked toward Joe’s room, she saw Randall approaching her from that direction. He said nothing when he passed her but gave her a look that was full of meaning. Had he spoken to Joe? Did he know the story of what really happened in Bolivia? Claire had to find out what Joe remembered and fast. But first, she had to see her partner, to reassure herself with her own five senses that he was truly awake and truly himself. When she and Gail reached the door, Gail pushed it open and Joe turned his head to look in their direction. Claire couldn’t control the overflow of her tears. Gail put a hand on her shoulder and said, “You go on in. I’m going to go get some coffee.” Claire nodded, not trusting her voice yet, and went to sit in the chair next to Joe’s hospital bed. She looked at him, at this man she loved like family, and all she could manage was a strangled, “Hey.”

“Hey,” he said back, and his voice was still a weak and frail sounding thing, but it was him, and it was music to her ears. She reached out to take his hand and said, “It’s so good to see you.”

“You too, LJ,” and his use of his nickname for her only caused the dam to break further, with more tears flowing unchecked down her face. They sat that way in silence for a few moments, with her holding his hand and allowing her relief to flow from her eyes. He was clearly still tired, and she didn’t want to keep him awake any longer than necessary, knowing how essential rest was to his continued recovery. But she had to know his recollection of the events of their last mission together. So, she asked, “Joe, do you remember what happened?” Slowly, his cadence full of fatigue, he answered, “The last thing I remember was walking out, trying to link to the satellite. And that sweet smile of yours. Yep, there it is,” he said as her mouth spread in a wide grin. It was a smile full of relief, her relief over his lack of memory of his MI-6 code name eclipsed by the relief of him being alive, of having beaten death once again, of not losing another person to the evil of OB8. His eyes slipped closed again and Claire quietly left the room, meeting Gail in the hallway returning with her coffee. She exchanged a few quiet words with her and promised a return visit the next day before heading out to the parking garage to go home and snatch a bit more sleep before her workday began.

An increasingly familiar feeling, one that caused a cold shiver up her spine, crept over Claire as she
walked toward her car. It was a feeling of being watched. Of being followed. Of being pursued. She stole a quick glance over her shoulder and saw that it wasn’t just her sleep-deprived imagination playing tricks on her. She knew it was Security Section. As she tried to work out her possible escape plans in her head, she continued walking, picking up her pace ever so slightly. But Security Section had learned from their previous encounters with her. They knew that sending one or even two officers wouldn’t be enough for a fighter as trained and skilled as Claire Beauchamp. Like a swarm of bees, they surrounded her before she could even process their appearance. Before she could even decide how to fight her way out of their circle, a car screamed up and skidded to a stop diagonally in front of her, blocking her in. A man emerged from the car and moved toward her quickly while someone from behind grabbed her arms. She struggled and squirmed and tried to kick out or slam her head backwards but it was no use. The quick hit of a tranquilizer gun into her neck brought her struggles to a stop. The officers dragged her to the car and put her in the back seat, the car disappearing into the night as rapidly as it had appeared. One of the officers still standing in the garage pulled his phone out of his pocket, called Jonathan Randall and said simply, “We’ve got her.”
This whole story is a labor of love, but I am insanely proud of how this chapter turned out. So buckle up- I hope you love it as much as I do! :)

Her first impressions upon waking were fuzzy, the effects of the tranquilizer still lingering, making her sluggish and unfocused. A rough fabric under her cheek (Mattress? Pillow? She wasn’t sure). A damp sort of cold that seeped into her bones (Underground?). A dim light above her on the wall (Were there any others?). She sat up slowly, waiting for the room to stop tilting as she rubbed the spot on her neck that was still sore from the shot of the tranquilizer gun. As her vision continued to come into focus, she saw she was in a cell of some kind. There were cinder block walls, bare concrete floors, two simple cots, and one bare lightbulb on the wall. Her first instinct was to try the door, although it looked like steel. She rose and walked toward it but was stopped in her tracks. Letting out a grunt of surprise and frustration, she realized her ankle was cuffed and chained to the wall behind her. She couldn’t even get within five feet of the door. Realizing there was nothing for her to do but wait, Claire went and sat back on the cot with her head in her hands.

Several floors above her, Jonathan Randall sat in his office across from Patrick Russell. “As you know, we’ve been investigating the possibility of a mole in this office. While you and Claire were in Switzerland, we picked up a third-party transmission. It confirmed what some in Security Section already believed: Agent Beauchamp is the mole. When you were in the field with Beauchamp, there was no indication?”

“Nothing,” Russell said simply, and he seemed genuinely surprised. By all appearances, Claire was an exemplary agent. “Well,” Randall replied, “we need to determine the extent of the damage done to us.”

“What can I do?” Russell asked him. “We need to convince Beauchamp that we believe the two of you are working together,” Randall answered. “And that if she doesn’t reveal to us the work she’s done against us, we’ll torture you. To death.” Russell took a moment to digest that suggestion and then wondered aloud, “Are you sure that will work?”

“Threat to colleagues is a fundamental interrogation technique,” Randall said as if he was quoting from a manual on the subject. But then, with a different tone in his voice, he said, “Claire in particular . . . yes, I think that she will respond.” Russell nodded and stood to leave Randall’s office. The older man stopped him by saying, “Mr. Russell. You understand that we need to make it appear you were questioned.” Russell simply nodded his understanding and awaited the arrival of Security Section.

Claire sat in the same spot with her head resting on her clasped hands some time later (time, once again, was a commodity that only existed outside her current reality and had no meaning in this room; she could have been there two hours or two days). Suddenly, the door burst open, Claire sat bolt upright and two men (guards, by their dress, mannerisms, and weapons) came in and threw a
third man on the other cot in the room. She saw right away that it was Russell. He was in bad shape: clothes disheveled, face and shirt bloody, one eye almost completely swollen shut. He lay still as the guards chained him around the ankle just as she was. Then they left the way they’d entered; the whole thing took mere moments. From his position still collapsed on the cot, he said, his voice tight with pain, “They think I’m part of this.”

“What do you mean?” Claire asked him. Her first question, asked to herself, had already been answered: she was clearly in OB8 custody. But if she’d passed the functional imaging test and performed her dead drop successfully in Milan, what was this about? “Don’t play games with me,” Russell replied. He slowly sat up and explained, “You know what I’m talking about. A transmission was sent from our position in Geneva, at the bank. They know it was one of us. They want to know how much damage has been done to them. There’s only one person in this room who can answer that question. Claire, I don’t know who you’re working for, but I need you to tell them what you know. They said they’re going to kill me, Claire. Slowly.”

“What do you believe them?” As she asked the question, she moved off her cot and squatted down in front of him. Clearly, this situation was personal now, and she needed to see his eyes. “They’re not bluffing,” he told her. “Do you believe them?” she asked again, her mind spinning. “Yes,” he said simply. Claire had to clamp down on the emotions that were threatening to overwhelm her, but she was teetering on the verge of tears. They believed she’d sent the transmission in Geneva and they were trying to use Russell to get her to talk. A combination of luck, skill, and outside intervention had protected her up until now. But on the concrete floor of an OB8 holding cell, it seemed to Claire that her run as a double agent was about to end.

Lamb walked through the office at the start of his workday. As always, he was trying to catch a glimpse of Claire without looking like he was trying to catch a glimpse of Claire. When he rounded the corner of the row of desks that included hers, all he saw was a bare tabletop where her things had been and the scattered wires that once connected to her computer. An instant feeling of dread and nausea rose in him and he placed his hands on the desktop to steady himself. To no one in particular, he asked, his voice as calm as he could make it under the circumstances, “Has Claire Beauchamp moved her desk?” Malcolm Grant, the nearest agent who’d heard Lamb’s question, turned and told him, “Security Section came and cleared it out about an hour ago.” Lamb clenched his teeth to try to stop the bile that rose in his throat. There was only one reason why Security Section would clear Claire’s desk. She’d been compromised.

The two guards who’d brought Russell into the cell returned a short time later, shouting and with guns drawn. They were yelling at Claire and Russell that they should get on their knees and put their heads on the floor. Now. They both did as they were told and looked at each other from across the room, wondering if theirs was the last face they would see before they died. It was a posture of execution, after all. Claire closed her eyes, thought of Jamie (I never got to tell him I love him), Lamb (we never got the chance to figure out our relationship), Geillis (my closest friend through everything), Joe (the brother I never had). She thought about her parents, wondered if she would see them again. She held all their beloved faces in her mind and waited for the end. Then: “Randall wants to know if you’re ready to talk to him.” Claire’s eyes snapped open at the sound of one of the guard’s voices. Her eyes connected with Russell’s once again and she paused for several moments, thinking, trying to plan her moves, reeling over her reprieve (however temporary). Finally, her forehead still pressed into the floor, she said in an even tone, “No. Tell him I have nothing to say.”
Lamb walked quickly to Security Section and into Samuel’s office. Samuel was one of the few officers in Security Section Lamb would count as a friend; they’d worked together for years and knew each other as well as anyone ever did in their business. Samuel was sitting at his desk working away at something on his computer but looked up when Lamb entered. The look he gave was full of knowing, as if he’d been expecting Lamb’s visit. “Samuel, what’s going on?” Lamb asked him, getting straight to the point. He knew that whatever was happening, time was not on his side. Samuel said nothing and continued to type, his silence worse than any answer he could have given. “Talk to me,” Lamb implored him. Samuel asked him, “What do you know?”

“What do I know?” Lamb echoed back. These questions were merely wasting time, time he didn’t have. Time Claire didn’t have, he was certain. “Have you talked to Randall?” Samuel asked, and Lamb wanted to scream. “I came to you first,” he replied, and soon they were talking over each other.

“You should talk to Randall.”

“Samuel, please.”

“Lamb, just do me a favor . . .”

“I need you to tell me what’s happening!” Lamb finally shouted. It was as if he could hear the clock, the one that measured the moments of his niece’s life, counting down second by second. It resounded in his head and terrified him as nothing ever had. Samuel sighed and then said quietly, “You didn’t hear this from me. While Claire and Russell were in Geneva, a transmission was recorded from their location, and it was not one of ours.”

“They think it was Claire?” Lamb asked, although he already knew the answer. Slowly, haltingly, Samuel answered, “This is not the first indication that she . . . might be working for someone else.” Keeping his face impassive even though his insides were churning (a skill honed over years of experience), Lamb said, “What exactly do they know?” Samuel looked through a pile of paperwork on his desk. When he looked up, his face showed genuine regret. Then he handed Lamb a file in a black security folder. “Lamb, I’m sorry,” he said, and his voice trailed away as he dropped his gaze to his keyboard, unable to meet his friend’s eyes any longer. With a quick glance at the security folder and without another word, Lamb turned and left Samuel’s office.

The guards had come to retrieve Claire and now she was in a different room. The cinder block walls, bad lighting, and damp cold were the same, but this time she was strapped to what looked like a dentist’s chair. When the guards left, she was alone in the room and began to struggle against her bonds, looking for any means of escape. She’d barely begun to acquaint herself with her restraints when a man who looked like a doctor came in. In green scrubs and a white lab coat, he certainly looked the part, but Claire knew in her gut that this man had no healing in him. He sat on a stool next to her chair and started putting on a pair of latex gloves. Something about the slow, deliberate way he checked every finger of the gloves shot Claire’s anxiety through the roof and her breathing became loud and gasping in a way she couldn’t control. Once his gloves were in place, he opened a drawer and pulled out a tape recorder and a tray of tools. She couldn’t identify most of them and knew she didn’t want to identify any of them. He turned the tape recorder on, set it on the tray, and tested one of the tools she did recognize: a taser.

Knowing she had no way of stopping him physically, she decided to try to distract him verbally, try to make some sort of connection with him. “My name is Claire Beauchamp,” she started simply, her mind inexplicably flashing to the one ridiculous time when Geillis had dragged her to a night of speed dating. “I’ve seen you around the office. I’ve always wondered what you did. I guess this is
what you do.” As she spoke, he was tying a piece of rubber tubing around her arm to expose her vein. He gave no indication that he’d heard her and said nothing in response. As a human being, she was invisible to him. She was simply a subject, a task in his workday. He was trained and paid by OB8 for exactly this purpose, to extract information from her by any means necessary. From the tray, he grabbed a syringe and held it up in the dim light. Claire could see a reddish liquid inside, likely some sort of truth serum. Once again, she found herself closing her eyes briefly, imagining her loved ones, and preparing for the inevitable.

While Ned worked on his latest gadget in his office, something on his computer caught his attention. He placed the new tech gently on his worktable, stepped away from his magnifying light and crossed the room to his monitor. His eyes widened at what he saw. As quickly as he could, he summarized the information and headed to Randall’s office. Ned mostly kept to himself at work, always more comfortable around technology than people. But even he had heard the whispers around the office today, whispers that involved Claire. Ned didn’t have a lot of friends, but he considered Claire to be one of them. And he couldn’t believe she was a traitor. He knocked on Randall’s office door and entered at his summons. Gathering his courage (he didn’t approach the boss unless it was absolutely necessary), he handed him a black folder and said, “Sir, I think ye should see this.” Then, in an uncharacteristic show of boldness, he didn’t turn and leave immediately, waiting for Randall to read over the new report and process the information. Only when his boss picked up his phone and motioned toward the door did Ned turn to leave, satisfied that he’d done what he could to help his friend.

“All I’m saying is maybe you and I should talk before we get started here.” Claire couldn’t help but make one more attempt to engage her would-be interrogator (and possible torturer) in conversation. Her only hope was distraction or connection; all her other physical resources were useless to her with her limbs restrained and her captor well out of reach. Once again, however, she could have saved her breath as he continued to prepare the injection with no acknowledgement of her words or even her presence outside of her arm. He held her arm with one hand and moved to position the needle at her vein with the other. Claire braced herself, but the injection never came. At the last moment, the door burst open (a nearly exact replay of Russell’s arrival in her cell earlier) and the guard ran in, clearly out of breath. Panting, he said simply, “Change of plans.”

Claire knew as she stood in Randall’s office that she looked just as wrecked as she felt. Her emotions were just under the surface, bouncing up occasionally like waves against a pier. It showed in the riot of her curls and the smudges under her eyes. She was exhausted, her nerves jangled, her head throbbing. But she was alive. What she couldn’t figure out, what she couldn’t even begin to attempt to puzzle through, was why she was alive. Fortunately for her, Randall didn’t keep her waiting long. “For the past three weeks, you’ve been under suspicion,” he began. “We knew we had a mole. And there were signs that indicated that it was you. And then when you were in Geneva, we picked up a third-party transmission, and it seemed to confirm that you betrayed OB8. And what I just learned is that it wasn’t your transmission. It was Russell’s.”

“Russell?” It was the only word Claire could find; her shock was completely genuine. It seemed Randall was on a roll, however, which did not require her to comment further. He stood from his chair and walked around his desk to face her. “Claire, I never believed that you would betray us. And when I realized it was Russell who was the mole, I felt vindicated.” Then he reached out his hands toward her and smiled. Even though everything inside her recoiled, she knew it was critical
for him to have his suspicions eased. It was a role, just like the ones she had to play when she went on missions. So, she reached out her arms, clasped his hands, and smiled in return, the dutiful soldier returned to the fold. Only after she’d returned home and collapsed on her bed for a few hours did she finally have a chance to wash off the remnants of his touch and her captivity, scrubbing furiously as her tears fell, then letting the water run over her until it ran cold.

On an unseasonably warm and pleasant day in December, it seemed everyone in Inverness was outside. To any observer, Jamie and Claire were simply two more people taking advantage of the day; Jamie at an outdoor café table with a cup of tea and a newspaper, Claire standing behind him looking at flowers at an outdoor stand. “That’s impossible,” Jamie said to his newspaper as Claire told the story of all that had transpired since their last meeting. He wouldn’t be surprised if she could hear the paper rustling in his hands, the tremor uncontrollable as his emotions took over. Once again, he’d been just moments from losing her. Only this time, he would have been completely powerless, not even learning her fate until after it was all over, perhaps never. He wondered how much he’d aged since she walked into his life. Loving her was never going to be easy. Is it ever? He thought with a rueful smirk.

“I know,” Claire replied, pulling a bloom from one of the buckets for her bouquet. “You’re telling me that when you were in Geneva, Russell was transmitting to S Branch at exactly the same time you were transmitting to MI-6?” he asked incredulously. “And OB8 picked up his transmission, not mine,” Claire finished. She was having an equally difficult time believing such a scenario. Her mind had wandered in circles for hours until she finally gave up and called Jamie. Even knowing the danger, she needed to talk things through with him to make sense of what happened with Russell. It was surprisingly easy for her to accept, this knowledge of how many areas of her life were now irretrievably intertwined with his. Despite her fiercely independent nature, one that was only reinforced by her unconventional upbringing, she welcomed Jamie’s gentle invasion into every part of her existence. “You should know that MI-6 has no record of any contact between him and Russian intelligence,” Jamie told her, further increasing her suspicions.

“In the cell, when Russell was trying to get me to talk, I asked him questions about his interrogation. When he told me that they threatened to kill him, he was blinking at erratic intervals, classic indication he was lying. So, I didn’t talk, only because I knew he wasn’t in any real danger. As far as I can tell, there are only three options. Either Randall still thinks I’m the mole and is using me somehow . . .” At that, Jamie interrupted and emphatically answered, “No, Sassenach. If Randall still suspected you he wouldn’t run the risk of letting you go free.” Claire nodded to the flowers and said, “Or two, Russell is actually S Branch.”

“Or three . . .” Jamie said and then trailed off. Claire filled in the blank: “Russell was a sacrificial lamb and he was innocent, was set up to get me out.” She paused for a moment and then began again. “At first I thought maybe it was MI-6.”

“No, it wasn’t us,” Jamie said, although he knew in the deepest part of himself that had he known what was happening when Claire was in OB8 custody he would have done anything, including framing someone else as the mole, to see her safe. “The truth is Russell could have been working for S Branch, so let’s just assume for the moment that you’re the luckiest lass in town,” he told her, standing from his chair and picking up a gift bag from the ground next to him. He went to stand beside her, pretending to be interested in flowers when he simply couldn’t resist the draw of her, the need to be closer, to see her face and know she was safe and alive and whole. “I’m sorry that I called you on a weekend, but I really needed to talk to you,” she told him, and somehow, he kept himself from laughing. Was there anything he wouldn’t do for her, at any hour of the day or night? It never seemed to be the right moment to tell her all his heart, so for the moment he simply said, “Ye
don’t ever have to apologize for calling me, Sassenach.”

Then, feeling a flush of red begin at his neck and creep inexorably up to his face, he said, “Speaking of which, I bought ye something.”

“What? No you didn’t.” Claire looked down then and noticed the gift bag, red with snowmen, that Jamie had placed on the sidewalk next to her feet. She couldn’t stop herself from stealing a glance at his face, her heart turning a full somersault at his look of embarrassment and concern. If she didn’t already know she was in love with him, completely, inexorably, she never would have made it past that moment. And then he spoke, his accent thickening in his adorable embarrassment, and she loved him even more than she had mere seconds before. “I dinna ken, Sassenach . . . just, I was in this store, this wee antique shop, ye ken . . .”

“What were you doing in an antique store?” she asked through her chuckles, thoroughly amused and completely besotted. It took every ounce of her self-possession not to simply throw herself into his arms and shower his face with kisses right there on the sidewalk, OB8 and MI-6 and everyone else be damned. He was laughing too, a sound that warmed everything inside her to a fiercely bright glow. It touched something in her, knowing that she was in his mind, in his thoughts when he went about his day, when he was out living the part of his life that still couldn’t physically include her. He smirked and answered, “I dinna ken what I was doing there, Sassenach. Anyway. Look, if ye don’t like it . . . just don’t tell me, aye?”

“Alright,” she said, “but I’m going to be concerned if next you tell me you have eight cats and plastic covers on your furniture.” He laughed again and said, “Are ye callin’ me an auld cat lady, Sassenach? Are ye laughin’ at me?” She was certain he could see her grin even out the corner of his eye and she laughingly said, “Yes, I most certainly am.” She was also certain she would be grinning like a fool the rest of the day and didn’t care a jot. He reached for a sunflower to get his mouth closer to her ear. Then, in a tone full of meaning, he said to her in a low voice, “Then the next time I get ye naked, Sassenach, ye’ll get what ye deserve.” Her eyes slammed shut, her entire body trembled, and she gripped the edge of a bucket of carnations until her knuckles turned white. Since he didn’t know when he’d see her next, he said quietly, “Merry Christmas, Claire.”

“Merry Christmas, Jamie.” She waited as long as she could while he walked down the sidewalk before diving into the tissue paper in the gift bag like a woman possessed. Then she covered her mouth with her hand, still grinning, only now through tears. It was a vase, cobalt blue glass, small and simple in design. But it was exactly what she would have picked if the contents of every antique store in Scotland were suddenly at her disposal. She had never owned a vase. Her childhood with Lamb was never settled enough for her to collect many possessions. Then she’d been a poor university student, then a well-traveled spy, and the tendency to live simply had stuck. A vase seemed like an extravagance, almost too settled for a life filled with so much uncertainty. But oh, how she’d craved a life that had room for such small indulgences, a life filled with stability and permanence and home and family and love. It seemed impossible and somehow completely right that he would know. And whether he knew it or not, she knew the vase was a promise. It was a promise of the life they would build together, one that would be filled with all the things she’d longed for and never had. She took the vase home and put it on her nightstand so she could see it daily. In the days ahead, as they continued to struggle against OB8 and The Federation, she would look at her vase and remember the promise.
YOU ALL ARE THE BEST!!! I am so glad you liked the vase! :) Once again, these two completely dictated where this chapter went, which was totally not where I was expecting. Hope you enjoy it!

Claire had to quickly shake off her disorientation over being back in the briefing room at OB8. The last time she’d been in this building, she’d been carried in and never expected to walk out. Now, she was back, listening to the man who’d wanted her dead explain her next mission. “Yousef al-Ashar is a wanted man,” Randall told the full room. “He’s been selling arms to S Branch and is now, we believe, looking to partner up with one of a number of rogue nations. This is the last documented photograph of al-Ashar taken almost a month ago in Barcelona. We’ve put a lot of manpower into finding him. We’ve come up with nothing. Last week, thanks to Agent Beauchamp, we were able to seize the majority of al-Ashar’s private assets, hoping that would help us to smoke him out. We think it has.” Lamb, who was sitting across from Claire at the conference table, picked up the briefing from there. She’d been watching him, trying to get a read on him. As usual, she felt frustrated in her attempts. “We picked up a burst of communications originating from this island,” he said as he pulled up a satellite image of the small strip of land. “What’s there?” Claire asked. “Private resort, more hideout than hideaway,” Lamb answered. “It’s a fugitive’s paradise, extradition is notoriously lax. The whole place is heavily secured, but anyone can buy entry for a price.”

“You think al-Ashar is there?” Claire wondered. “No, it’s not likely,” Randall said, and Claire suppressed a sigh of frustration. “But it does give us a lead. Sampson Deveraux,” Randall explained as he pulled up a photo on the monitors. “Former resident of the US, master forger, military advisor, and now self-employed. Pemba Island has been his home over the last twelve years.” The part about forgery caught Claire’s attention and she quickly connected the dots. “You think Deveraux made al-Ashar new identity papers?”

“That’s our best bet,” Randall answered. He handed her a folder and said, “You’ll go in as Veronica Kane, daughter of industrialist Mark Kane. Your assignment is to locate Deveraux and ascertain the new identity of Yousef al-Ashar.”

As Claire attempted to put her desk back together after the briefing, Lamb came to her and said in a low voice, “Claire, I heard about what happened. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she reassured him, although her smile did not reach her eyes. “Russell. It was a shock,” Lamb said, shaking his head. It was nice, Claire thought to herself, to know that some things never changed. Her uncle’s capacity for dry understatement was as constant as the tides. But her inner amusement quickly faded. She knew she had to ask him about the suspicions she’d discussed with Jamie. “You didn’t . . .” she began and then as her voice faded off, he asked, “What?”

“Have anything to do with that?” she finished in a rush. “You mean, did I engineer it somehow? No, Claire, of course not.” As he walked away, Claire felt no reassurance. In fact, she felt something prickling the back of her mind, a memory of her childhood with him that kept slipping from her grasp the harder she tried to bring it into focus. She laid it aside for now, compartmentalizing as she’d learned to do so well. Setting up a meeting with Jamie and
transforming herself into Veronica Kane for her next mission were her priorities for now.

Unfortunately for Claire, she couldn’t keep the situation with Russell off her radar for very long. That night in the warehouse, Jamie told her, “He was killed. Russell. Last night.” Claire closed her eyes and dropped her head, taking a deep breath to attempt to steady herself. It wasn’t unexpected news, but still difficult to accept. Somehow, Russell had taken the fall for her, and Claire couldn’t help but feel a surge of guilt that he’d borne the ultimate punishment in her place. Before she could find the will to raise her head or open her eyes, Jamie’s arms were around her and nothing else mattered. She shuddered out a breath, brought her own arms around his back and allowed herself to be held. To be sheltered. To be comforted. Her head rested on his chest as if she’d been born to find that exact spot. He gently stroked his hand over her hair and spoke over her in Gaelic. “Tha e ceart gu leòr, mo chridhe. Chan e do choire-sa a th ‘ann.” (It’s alright, my heart. It’s not your fault.) The tone of his voice, the understanding and compassion in it, even if she didn’t know the meaning of the words, caused some of her emotions to spill over and she felt her tears dampening the fabric of his dress shirt under her cheek. She pulled back, suddenly and absurdly concerned over the condition of his shirt. Jamie looked down, having felt the dampness, then gently wiped her tears from her cheeks with his thumb and said with a grin, “I’ll send ye the dry-cleaning bill, Sassenach.”

It was the perfect way to break the seriousness of the moment and Claire laughed, shaking her head and marveling once again at how attuned he was to her needs and moods. Her laughter didn’t last long, but her mirth, though brief, was full, lighting her eyes and flashing in her smile. Jamie felt warm all the way to the backbone to see it. He wondered to himself if he would ever grow accustomed to the overwhelming sense of rightness and completion he felt with Claire in his arms. He was grateful to be able to offer her any solace he could, momentary though it might be. “Will ye be alright?” he asked her, and she felt like she was drowning in the ocean of his eyes. Claire turned away from him, her words coming out in a burst of emotion as she said, “OB8 took another man’s life. Another man who was connected to me. The bottom line is that Russell would still be alive if he hadn’t been my partner in Switzerland. Maybe it would be safer for you not to be my handler.”

“What?” Jamie roared, and Claire spun back around to face him. “I cannot let them take you too!” she shouted, her tears back and flowing down her face. “I WILL NOT LET THEM STEAL ANOTHER MAN THAT I . . .” As she trailed off her eyes blew wide and she brought her hand up to cover her mouth. Jamie’s eyes had blown wide too, and Claire wanted to sink into the floor and disappear. They both knew what she’d almost revealed and she turned away again, unable to face the box of secrets she’d kicked open, lying between them, cursing herself for being one hundred kinds of fool for letting her guard down, letting her emotions control her mouth. She felt him behind her, felt his hands on her shoulders and she shuddered. Even having just recently been so close to death, she was infinitely more frightened now, with her heart seemingly danglingly in the air of the storage warehouse, naked, vulnerable, exposed. She doubted she would ever recover if he mishandled it.

Instead, she heard him say in the smallest voice she could ever imagine coming from him, “Please tell me the rest, Claire. Tell me what ye were going to say. Please.” Claire heaved a sigh. She was already dangling by her fingertips from the edge of the cliff. There was no way she could pull herself back. But, “I’m afraid,” she told him, in a voice equally soft. “Of what, my Sassenach?” he asked, now stroking his fingers up and down her shoulders and upper arms, leaning closer so his breath tickled her ear. “I’m afraid if I start, I will never stop. And I’m afraid if I lose you, I’ll never survive.” His arms came fully around her then, and she pressed her back into his front and gripped his hands where they rested on her belly. She needed his courage. So, he would give it. “I wanted ye from the first time you sat in my office, crazy red hair and all,” he said to her, and she could feel his smile against her ear, and it caused her own to break through her tears. Then he brought his
hands back to her shoulders and turned her around. “But I loved ye from the moment I saw ye walk into the blood mobile the first time.” Her eyes sparkled in wonder and she slid her hands up to his shoulders and said simply, “I love you.” He lowered his head and their lips met in a kiss of surpassing sweetness and joy. Soon he couldn’t contain all he felt in that one meeting of lips, so he lifted her off the ground and brought her entire body flush against his as her feet and legs swung slightly in the air.

He lowered her slowly and she took full advantage of her position to slide against him, both moaning with need. “Ye really think ye could get rid of me, Sassenach? Whatever is coming, whatever we face, we have a better chance together than apart, and ye ken it as well as I.” She nodded and leaned her forehead into his, feeling spent but pleasantly so after they’d shown all their hearts to each other. She knew he was right, knew there was no one better to help see her safe. But she would do everything in her power to see him safe too. “So, in Tanzania, if you do find Devereaux, and al-Ashar’s new identity, if he has one . . .” Claire smiled and said, “I’ll keep it away from OB8.” Kiss. “And give it to you.” Kiss. Then they both moaned again as they prepared to part, but both left the warehouse feeling several inches off the ground. They knew the truth, and the truth had set them free.

I get to stay at a beautiful resort and bask in the sun while pretending to be a spoiled rich girl, Claire thought to herself as she walked through the lobby of the resort on Pemba Island like she owned it. Nice work if you can get it, she thought and gave herself an internal smirk that would have rivalled one of Jamie’s. She wore a blonde wig, a black and white tailored dress that cost more than she made in a month, and a wide-brimmed black and white hat. And of course, her ensemble wouldn’t have been complete without the special sunglasses Ned had made for her before her departure from Inverness (he’d explained to her with his usual enthusiasm that the glasses had built-in telephoto lenses and took pictures silently). She walked over to the front desk, gave the woman working there her false identity, and waited to complete her check in while scanning her surroundings. After the desk clerk informed her that her room was ready, she went out to the pool deck briefly. It didn’t take her long to spot Devereaux. She used her sunglasses to photograph him and his security detail before heading to her room. If the pool was where he was, the pool was where she would be.

In a simple black bikini, the perfect blank canvas to highlight the long, toned lines of her body, Claire headed straight for the empty lounger next to Devereaux and sat down, taking a lingering sip of her drink before setting it on the table. She struck up a conversation with him, turning on a flirtatious charm almost completely foreign to Claire Beauchamp but second nature to Veronica Kane. It was almost laughable how easy it was to get him to give up his room number. Lingering a bit longer so she wouldn’t seem too anxious to be gone, she wrapped her sheer black sarong around her waist and headed to Devereaux’s room. Ned had also given her a special descrambler disguised as a cell phone as part of her op tech that would open any door controlled by a standard hotel key card system. The door to room 2524 was no exception and she was out of the hallway in seconds. The décor was ultra-modern, all white, with sleek furniture and minimal decorations. Claire started searching the room, finding several fake passports but none that looked like they belonged to al-Ashar. She went to the desk next, flipping through stacks of paper and trying to figure out how she could get into the laptop. Her search was cut short, however, when the door opened and one of Devereaux’s security guards came in. Claire straightened up and went very still when the guard pulled his gun and demanded, “Who the hell are you?”

She stayed silent for the time it took her to come up with a cover story. Then she stuck out her hip, placed her hands on her waist, and said with a demanding pout in her voice, “Where is Sampson? He was supposed to meet me here twenty minutes ago! And you’re pulling a gun on me? What in the world is this? Well, he can just forget it now. I will not be treated in such a fashion.” As she
spoke, she started walking towards the guard and when she got within arm’s reach, she struck, knocking the gun out of his hands as she swung out with fists and feet. With one solid kick to the chest, she sent him flying through a sliding partition that divided the space. Claire looked down to confirm the guard was indeed out cold; then all she could look at was the room. It was a fully equipped operating room, complete with gurney, surgical instruments, an IV stand, and a rolling computer terminal with monitor. On it, she saw before and after pictures- of Yousef al-Ashar.

Lamb and Randall sat across from each other in Randall’s office on a Thursday afternoon after Claire’s return from Tanzania. Randall’s tone was all business when he told Lamb, “Yousef al-Ashar doesn’t just have a new name. He has a new face and he’s now living in Kingston. He’s using the alias Naphtali Fayed. And as you know, he’s broken an agreement with OB8. He’s stolen from us. The whole community is watching. We need to set an example with al-Ashar.”

“Any intel about where in Kingston he might be?” Lamb asked. Randall shook his head and answered, “No, we don’t know. That’s why I’m sending you to Jamaica. I need you to rendezvous with your usual contacts, locate al-Ashar, and take care of him. Thank you,” he added, not waiting for a response but knowing Lamb would carry out his assignment without questions. “I heard about Russell,” Lamb mentioned. “And now with al-Ashar . . . I understand it’s been a difficult week.”

“I’m used to it, as you know. I dwell in darkness, and darkness is where I belong. I do not need sympathy from anyone, nor will anyone receive any from me,” he said, and Lamb suppressed a shudder. He did know. All too well. Then Randall’s face hardened and if Lamb hadn’t known him so well, he might have flinched. Enunciating each word clearly and tapping his finger on the desk with each word for emphasis, Randall leaned forward and gritted out, “I want al-Ashar dead by the weekend.”

Claire was trying to catch up on reading for classes at the end of a long day. She was stretched out on her bed, forgoing her usual glass of wine for sparkling water so she could concentrate on the material. Geillis was out for the night on her most recent first date, so Claire had the apartment to herself. It had taken all her considerable spy abilities to throw Geillis off when Claire had come home grinning like an idiot after her last visit to the warehouse. She knew Geillis was still suspicious of what was going on, but the mere idea of Claire having some sort of secret affair was sufficiently scandalous to keep Geillis entertained for the moment. Claire sighed when she realized just how easily her thoughts had, once again, drifted to her tall, red-haired Scottish handler. Hers. She could fully acknowledge it now. There were no more secrets between them, nothing to hide, only more to discover. She sighed and looked over at the vase he’d given her, brimming with a burst of pansies she’d just placed there that afternoon. She shook her head at herself- since when had she become so sentimental? Part of it could only be attributed to him, she knew, but she’d longed for such emotional connection ever since she lost her parents. A sense of place, of belonging, of permanence. If she was truly being honest with herself, it was part of what had connected her to Frank. Even before him, with Lamb, for a long time she’d wanted to put down roots wherever they landed, before she’d grown older and realized it just wasn’t in his nature or the nature of their life together. Her mind drifted to the places they’d lived and the times she’d asked him for a puppy, or a pony, or a little piece of land for a garden. He’d always try to placate her even though she was aware of the limitations of their way of life. Suddenly, she sat straight up in her bed as her memory crystallized. It was the memory she’d been reaching for earlier in the week when she’d asked Lamb about her capture. And she knew as surely as she knew anything, she knew that he’d been lying to her about his role in her rescue.
Unable to either study or sleep after her realization about Lamb, Claire had finally given up and called Jamie. Now, she was pacing in front of him at the warehouse, gesturing with her hands as she spoke. Jamie had never seen so much restless energy in her before. She was a live wire, her curls shooting off in every direction and her words tumbling over each other like water over rocks. He’d come right after her late-night call even though they were supposed to have met the next day to debrief her mission in Tanzania. “Lamb’s always been matter-of-fact, dry, straightforward,” she told him. “But something about the vase you gave me sparked a memory from my childhood with him. Whenever he wasn’t telling me the truth about something- like letting me plant flowers or getting me a puppy- his tone would change. It would get more soothing, placating, like he was trying to convince me to believe him. And that was the same tone he had when I asked him about Russell. I know he was lying to me. I know he somehow pinned the blame on Russell for what happened in Switzerland.” She stopped pacing and stood in front of him with her hands on her hips, as if daring him to contradict her.

“Russell wasn’t such an innocent,” Jamie responded forcefully, and Claire’s eyes widened. He couldn’t help his emotions from spilling over, being reminded once again of how close he’d come to losing her. Now he was the one growing more animated as he spoke, his accent thickening and the storm growing in his eyes. “Ye want to know about Russell, Sassenach? He was an early member of OB8. He knew he was working with the bad guys. He was the leader of at least a dozen operations that stole weapons and chemicals and intel and sold them to enemies of the UK for cash. That cash was used to fund more OB8 operations, just like the one that killed yer fiancé, like the one that almost killed Joe. He got what he deserved.”

Claire was surprised by his response, although she understood both his instinct to learn more about Russell (trying to assuage her guilt over his death) and the emotion behind his words (her brushes with death took on a whole new meaning in light of his love for her, each one stinging like a lash from a whip). Treading carefully, she said, “If you know so much about Russell, then you know he wasn’t S Branch.” Claire looked at him inquisitively, her head tilting slightly to one side. She sensed that there was much more going on than she knew. They stood in silence for a moment, and the silence seemed to invite confession. “It seems he was sacrificed, aye,” Jamie admitted quietly. The détente ended in an instant and Claire was pacing again. “That’s not a choice my uncle can just make!” Claire shot back, growing more frustrated by the minute. Jamie’s voice rose to match hers and he asked, “What would ye have done? Had it been yer niece? Yer daughter? Or yer son? Or Frank?” Or you, Claire thought to herself, and nodded to him to acknowledge his point, the silence settling over them again, this time calmer, steadier. She took the initiative and went to him, her hand lifting to cradle one side of his face. If she had been in her uncle’s place and Jamie had been the one with his life on the line, Claire knew she would have done the same or worse to save him. She told him as much, though no words were necessary. They smiled at each other and then Jamie kissed her forehead and said, “Tell me about Tanzania.”
“Yousef al-Ashar’s new identity is Napthali Fayed,” she told him after a brief pause. Digging in her bag, she pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to him. “This is his new passport number. I got back to Inverness yesterday morning and met with Randall. I told him Tanzania was a failure, that I was unable to find out al-Ashar’s new identity.”

“Randall found out yesterday that al-Ashar, or whatever his name is now, is in Jamaica. Randall sent your uncle to Jamaica to kill al-Ashar,” Jamie told her with a sigh, and Claire was stunned and deeply disappointed. She thought she’d accomplished her mission and kept the intel away from Randall and it was all for nothing. “Wait. How do you know about this?” Claire asked him. “After your uncle met with Randall, he met with me. His usual handler was unavailable, so they asked me to go instead,” Jamie answered.

In the back of a cargo van parked in an alley in Inverness, Lamb looked at Jamie, who was sitting on the small desk in the back of the van. Never one to waste time or words, he said simply, “I’m leaving for Jamaica in thirty minutes. What’s the counter-mission?”

“Randall may want al-Ashar dead, but MI-6 needs him alive,” Jamie answered. “We need his client list. It will tell us what weapons he sold, who has them. It’s invaluable.”

“Mr. Fraser, I don’t need a lesson in the international arms trade,” Lamb said sarcastically. Jamie stood then and snapped back, “Fine. Go to Jamaica, use your contacts, find al-Ashar. But instead of taking him out, you’ll tell him the truth: that OB8 sent you to kill him. You’ll then convince him you’re turning on OB8, that you’re planning on leaving them, and that you’re willing to fake his death in exchange for his client list.”

“You’re making a huge mistake,” Lamb said, shaking his head. “Am I?” Jamie asked. “If you’re trusting a man like al-Ashar, yes,” Lamb told him. Jamie shook his head in return and said, “There will be an MI-6 team waiting at the location where his death is to be faked. Al-Ashar will never be a free man again.”

Jamie paused, his mouth still slightly open as if he couldn’t decide if he was done speaking. “And that’s all that happened?” Claire asked, and she was surprised when Jamie turned away from her without answering. Even with his back turned, she could see his fingers drumming against his thigh. He’d been prepared to stop there. He wanted to tell her that was all, that her uncle was going to get al-Ashar for MI-6, and then kiss her good night and let her get back to her studies. The shapes of the words were already forming in his mouth and on his tongue. Jamie didn’t want to tell Claire the rest of the story, didn’t want to reveal the rest of what he’d learned in his meeting with Lamb. But as much as he wanted to shield her, he simply couldn’t bring himself to lie to her, not when he’d stood in this same space with her days earlier and they’d shown each other their whole hearts. Jamie also knew that Claire harbored no illusions about her uncle. In truth, she was probably even more suspicious of Lamb than Jamie was. Letters and syllables rearranged themselves and he finally produced sound to go with them. “Nah, there’s more,” he said, taking a deep breath and turning back to face her.

“I’ll make contact by 6 pm tomorrow,” Lamb told him, turning to leave through the back door of the van. “I got a copy of Russell’s transmission, the one OB8 intercepted,” Jamie told him, and Lamb paused, his back still turned to Jamie. “I also went through the MI-6 logs and compared the two. They don’t match. You fixed the transmission, made it look like it was Russell, by altering the signal’s point of origin and changing the message content.” Lamb had turned to face Jamie during this speech, his face reflecting his increasing anger with every word out of the younger man’s mouth. Finally, Lamb replied, his voice brimming with rage and disdain, “Whoever the hell you think you are, checking up on me, pulling my file, second-guessing my choices, let’s just both face the facts- you’re not that person. Neither your experience nor your intelligence has earned you the
right to question a thing I do. So, I’m going to make two suggestions. One, stop it. And two, the
next time they assign you to be my handler, politely decline.”

“Russell never transmitted a thing, did he?” Jamie asked, not letting up for a second. “Of course he
didn’t,” Lamb admitted. “If you got the OB8 transmission why the hell are you asking me?”

“I never got the OB8 transmission. It was just a hunch,” Jamie replied, and for the first time in any
of their meetings, Lamb was stumped speechless. He’d been completely outmaneuvered. Taking a
moment to regroup, he confessed in a much softer tone, “I’d just learned that my niece was about to
be tortured, Mr. Fraser. Most likely executed. I had no time to go for help. I knew that altering the
transmission was a dangerous gamble. They could have detected a disruption. But it was all I
could do. And now, I leave it to you to judge what I’ve done. Honestly, though, I don’t give a damn
what you do about it.” And with that, Lamb turned and walked out the back door of the van.

Claire had gone to sit on a crate while Jamie finished his story and her mind was reeling with all
she’d heard. Jamie’s reaction on recalling the story to Claire was much the same as it had been
immediately after Lamb walked out of their meeting, a reaction he was sure would have greatly
surprised the older man had he stayed around to hear it. He was grateful, so grateful there were no
words in any language he could use to express it. The bottom line for Jamie was that Lamb had
saved Claire’s life. While he would have preferred Lamb find another way to accomplish Claire’s
rescue, for him the end more than justified the means. Jamie had never been much of a rule follower
himself and certainly not in most ways related to Claire. He also firmly believed what he’d told
Claire earlier, that Russell had ultimately received a just punishment for his role in OB8’s criminal
enterprise. It was messy, it was devious, and it clearly wasn’t ideal, but it was done. Jamie went and
sat beside Claire and held her hand, not speaking, allowing her to process what she’d learned.

“I wish there’d been another way,” she finally said quietly. “I wish his love for me didn’t always
wind up being so complicated. It feels like he and I are heading for a reckoning at some point and I
have no idea how it’s all going to play out. But he’s the only family I have left, and I feel like I must
try to salvage a relationship with him, whatever that looks like.” She heaved a frustrated sigh and
leaned her head on his shoulder. His arm came around her and he said, “Yer wrong about one thing,
a neighan. Lamb’s not yer only family.” Her eyes slid closed and she sighed again, this time a
sound of pure contentment as she allowed his words to sink into all the hollow places inside. Down
they went, into her very bones, sparking dreams behind her eyelids of what having him as her family
would look like, sound like, smell like, imagining a time when such things could finally move from
the land of dreams to reality. Jamie’s phone ringing pulled them out of their contented silence, and
he slid away and walked to the other side of the storage locker to take the call. Claire heard Jamie
say Ian’s name as he moved away from her, but after a few words of English the rest of the
conversation took place in rapid Gaelic. It didn’t take Jamie shouting “Ifrinn!” for her to realize that
whatever the news was, it wasn’t good. She stood and went to him as he hung up the phone, and
what she saw in his face scared her deeply.

“Claire, something’s happened,” he told her, running a hand through his hair. “In Jamaica, your
uncle made contact with an old informant, a Kingston insider who helped set up the meeting between
him and one of al-Ashar’s men.”

“Something went wrong at the meeting, didn’t it?” she asked, and his nod confirmed her fears. “It
was an ambush,” Jamie said, and he told her about the meeting at an outdoor café in Kingston that
had turned into a showdown with guns drawn. Her uncle was significantly outnumbered and hadn’t
had a chance. “Sassenach, al-Ashar has your uncle,” Jamie concluded, hating the constant feeling of
having to bring her bad news. He knew the feeling was only going to grow when Claire demanded,
“What is being done?”
“We have a team in place in Kingston. But Munro doesn’t want to make a move yet. He says having an MI-6 team scouring the countryside will only attract the kind of attention we can’t afford.” Jamie saw the fire that lit in Claire’s whiskey eyes and knew what was coming. He’d known what was coming as soon as Ian told him what had happened to Lamb. “You said you understand what my uncle did for me, that he couldn’t just wait and do nothing.” Jamie nodded and she told him, “Then you’ll understand that I’m going to need your help to get to Jamaica.”

With nothing more than some pictures of her targets and a few loose contacts, Claire went to work trying to find Lamb as soon as she got to Kingston. She went to the café where he was last seen, to bars, back alleys, and everywhere in between. It felt like she was making almost no progress, like time was speeding by while she moved at a snail’s pace. At the end of the first day, she collapsed into bed and spent a few fitful hours trying to sleep, rising early the next morning to start again. She knew she had no chance of finding him without a little luck. She finally got some when she overheard a group of women in the market talking about a man who’d moved into one of the old plantation houses outside of town and the cowering woman he sent to do his grocery shopping for him. Claire showed them the picture of al-Ashar’s new face she’d taken from Deveraux’s room in Tanzania and they nodded and pointed excitedly, chattering over each other. Eventually, Claire managed to sort out directions to al-Ashar’s new hideout. Checking out of her hotel, she stuffed the few items she’d packed into her backpack and decided to head out on foot (since it wasn’t far and she would leave less of a trail that way).

Meanwhile, at al-Ashar’s house, Lamb was still trying to complete his mission despite his captivity. He hadn’t anticipated entering negotiations with al-Ashar while tied to a chair, but one way or another he’d made it where he needed to be to get the job done. Al-Ashar certainly wasn’t making his stay a comfortable one; Lamb had already taken several blows to the head as his captor directed some of his considerable animosity towards OB8 in Lamb’s direction. He could feel blood running down his face from an open cut above his right eye, unable to wipe it away due to his bound hands. But he’d surprised al-Ashar when he’d called him by his new name, and he used that surprise to his advantage. “Yes, I know your new identity. More importantly, OB8 does too. You’re not naïve enough to believe they won’t find you eventually, no matter what happens to me. We can help each other.” He laid out the deal exactly as Jamie had to him, telling al-Ashar he was leaving OB8 and that he would help al-Ashar fake his death in exchange for his client list. Lamb could tell al-Ashar was seriously considering his offer. In fact, he even went so far as to untie Lamb’s hands and bring him outside to the patio, still under guard, while he continued to weigh his options.

Claire made excellent time and knew she was in the right place as soon as she saw the armed guards. She snuck past the ones on the outer perimeter of the plantation house and ran toward the main house, her plan to gain access wherever she could and begin a room-by-room search for Lamb. But she never made it that far. There was a guard outside her peripheral vision who saw her run past without her spotting him first. He shouted at her to stop and they fought briefly before the guard brought up his rifle butt and connected it to the side of Claire’s face, sending her to the ground and into blackness.

Lamb and al-Ashar continued their chat on the patio when a guard approached and had a low-voiced conversation with al-Ashar. Al-Ashar nodded and patted the guard on the back, obviously pleased with what he’d been told. He turned back to Lamb and said, “So you came here alone? And you say you’re leaving OB8. How do I know you’re telling me the truth?”

“Because you can trust me,” Lamb told him. Shaking his head, al-Ashar said, “Not good enough. I’m going to need proof before I will make a deal with you. I want proof that what you’ve told me is true, that you are truly willing to go against OB8.”
“Anything,” Lamb told him, and turned in his chair as he heard some commotion from behind. Two guards were dragging a barely conscious woman across the patio, leaving her on the ground next to al-Ashar. Lamb could tell almost instantly that it was Claire and had to use every ounce of his training and experience not to betray any emotion to their captors. He had no idea what she was doing there or how she'd found him, but he knew they were both in a lot of trouble. Her hand came up to her head and she moaned, sitting up very slowly. Her eyes widened momentarily when she saw Lamb but then she quickly schooled her features into an emotionless mask. Despite the circumstances, Lamb couldn’t help the surge of pride he felt. She truly was a remarkably gifted agent. Lamb focused back on al-Ashar when the other man said, “So, you’re willing to do anything to prove you’re truly leaving OB8? Alright. This woman is an officer of OB8. And you’re going to kill her.” He traded places with the guard standing next to Lamb and handed Lamb a pistol, loaded and ready to fire. “Go ahead, kill her. Kill this officer of OB8 and you have a deal.” Uncle and niece looked at each other across the expanse of the patio and Lamb raised the gun and pointed it at Claire.
Known and Unknown

Chapter Summary

I promised you a nice long chapter since I didn't post last week. Well get comfy because here it is! And there's a very special surprise coming at the end, so hang in there!

Chapter Notes

I originally wanted this story to be set now. But the time frame just wasn't going to work out with the events in this chapter and beyond. So just for reference, this story takes place around the same time as "Alias" originally aired in the early 2000s. :)

The entire world seemed to have both narrowed and frozen. There was nothing beyond the space occupied by Lamb, Claire, al-Ashar, and his guards. For a seeming eternity that lasted mere moments, no one moved, no one spoke. It seemed that the very air around them stilled; no breeze moved the trees, no insects stirred, no sounds carried to their ears. The only movement came from Lamb’s eyelids, blinking rapidly and fixated on Claire. Finally, he broke the silence and said to al-Ashar, “Shooting this agent proves nothing.”

“To me, it proves everything,” al-Ashar responded. “You come to me and you make me an offer. You say you’re willing to work against OB8, and that you’re working alone. Then she shows up.”

“Obviously OB8 sent her here without my knowledge,” Lamb said, spending every moment he wasn’t speaking staring at Claire and blinking. “Well then, you should have no problem proving your loyalty to me,” al-Ashar told him. Leaning closer to Lamb’s face, he said, “Kill this agent, and I’ll believe you and I’ll accept your offer. And if you choose not to, then I’ll just have to say goodbye to both of you.” Another long, still silence. Then everything happened at once. Lamb fired his gun: not at Claire, but at the guard standing to Claire’s right. As he hit the ground, Claire popped up and disarmed the guard to her left while Lamb moved to secure al-Ashar. Once the two guards on Claire’s side of the patio were both on the ground, she worked to secure their weapons while Lamb shouted at al-Ashar, “Hands in the air! Now!” Claire rose to go to Lamb and said, “It took me a second to realize what you were doing.”

“I was blinking as fast as I could,” he told her as he bound al-Ashar’s hands behind his back. “I know,” Claire said. “I thought, ‘Hard on your light?’”

“Guard on your right,” Lamb corrected her. “I know,” Claire said again. “I figured it out, I was just never very good at Morse Code.” Lamb went to the guard he’d shot and was searching for something on the body when Claire noticed blood on his shoulder. “Lamb, you were shot,” she told him. He instantly dismissed it, saying simply, “It’s nothing.” Handing the walkie talkie he’d recovered from the guard to al-Ashar, he told him, gun pointing at his head, “Call your guards. Have them meet out back. We’re going out the front. We’re fluent in Arabic so just do as we say.” Wanting to test Lamb’s assertion, al-Ashar asked him a question in Arabic. Lamb’s immediate and flawless response was enough to convince him, and he called the guards as Lamb instructed. While
all the guards went to meet at the back of the house, Lamb, Claire, and al-Ashar went to the front of the house, climbed in a waiting car, and took off, Lamb driving while Claire held al-Ashar at gunpoint in the back seat.

They drove in silence through the hills around Kingston for a while. Finally, al-Ashar was overcome with curiosity and asked, “So what now? You take me to the mountains and kill me?”

“The plan doesn’t change,” Lamb told him, making eye contact in the rearview mirror. “You’re still going to give me your client list. And I’m still going to make sure OB8 thinks you’re dead.” Al-Ashar seemed relieved by this news and laughed, saying, “I don’t care who you work for as long as you let me go.”

At an MI-6 safehouse in Kingston later that day, after some work that would have made any Hollywood makeup artist proud, Lamb was taking pictures of al-Ashar’s supposedly dead body. A very convincing fake gunshot wound to the chest and a puddle of blood beneath him on the floor completed the illusion, and Lamb took pictures from multiple angles to capture the scene. “Ok, get up,” Lamb told al-Ashar when he finished, wiping off some of the fake blood he’d gotten on himself then handing the towel to al-Ashar so he could do the same. “Do you have any idea how much this suit cost me?” al-Ashar said as he threw the towel back to Lamb. “It’s not cheap, you know?”

“Give me your client list,” Lamb said, unwilling to engage al-Ashar in anything other than the business at hand. Claire was watching their interaction as she worked to set up communications at a table on the other side of the room. She’d never been in the field with her uncle before and it was an enlightening education for her to watch him work. Al-Ashar pulled out a handheld electronic device, pulled up his client list and handed it to Lamb. Lamb turned away from al-Ashar and put the device in his pocket once he was satisfied with its contents. He heard al-Ashar say from behind him, “You said you had a way for me to get out of Jamaica.” Lamb responded, “Oh yes,” then drove his elbow into the other man’s face. Lamb knelt to secure al-Ashar’s hands for the second time that day and said to Claire, “Two years ago- of course I knew you were working for OB8- I heard you’d been sent to Egypt to meet with this jackass. It turned my stomach that you were in this business.”

“Come here,” she said to him gently, and he crossed the room and sat down on the table near her. He suddenly seemed incredibly frail and tired when a few minutes earlier he’d seemed invincible. She ripped open the sleeve of his shirt so she could get a better look at his shoulder wound. “I think you’ve got a lacerated blood vessel,” she told him after she’d cleaned the wound. “I’m alright,” Lamb told her, not even flinching as she worked on him, keeping his pain well-hidden. He’d always been good at hiding things from her. Without looking up from her work, Claire said in a small voice, “Can I ask you something?” She didn’t wait for an answer, plowing ahead before her courage failed. “When you started with OB8, you knew they were a mercenary group, that they had no connection to MI-6. But I didn’t. When I joined, I thought I was going to be saving the world, not making it more dangerous.”

“What’s your question?” Lamb asked, and she finally looked up and met his eyes. “Why didn’t you say something? You could have told me what I was really doing- damage instead of good. But you kept quiet.” Lamb sighed and paused for a moment before giving her the simplest answer he could. “Revealing the truth about what you were doing would have required revealing the truth about what I was doing.” She knew it was the most she was going to get out of him for now. It frustrated her, to be sure, but she felt as though something fundamental had shifted in their understanding of each other in the past few hours. Seeing each other in the field had removed a layer of mystery for them both and they saw many similarities in the way they worked, the way they solved problems, the way they improvised. It was a step in the right direction and Claire couldn’t help but feel hopeful. A short time later, they drove to meet the MI-6 helicopter that would take Claire and al-Ashar off the island. Since Lamb was still technically on his OB8 mission, he had to return separately. When
Claire climbed into the helicopter, Lamb said simply, “I’ll see you,” and Claire responded, “Ok,” but they shared a look that was full of meaning. Maybe, just maybe, she hadn’t lost all her family after all.

“As al-Ashar and I headed to the mainland United States, my uncle contacted OB8 and told them al-Ashar was dead and his mission was a success. So, it all worked. OB8 has no idea I was gone, MI-6 has al-Ashar, and my uncle is alright. So, thank you.” Claire smiled at Jamie as she sat on a table in the warehouse. He sat opposite her in a chair turned backwards, basking in her smile and, as always, the sheer relief and joy of her safe return from the field. “I didn’t do anything, Sassenach,” he told her, shaking his head. Claire shook her head insistently in return and said, “You got me to Jamaica. And you know what? You were right.”

“I’d like to hear ye say that more often,” Jamie said with a smirk and Claire rolled her eyes but smiled in response. “What, specifically, was I right about this time, Sassenach?” She lost all trace of humor in her face and he felt pinned in place by the intensity in her golden eyes. “What happens when someone you care about is in trouble. What you said- that nothing else matters. It all just goes away. Last week, when I learned what my uncle did for me, sacrificing Russell, it made me sick. But now I know I would have done exactly the same thing.” She gave a small laugh and said, a note of surprise and wonder in her voice, “You should have seen him.”

“Yer uncle?” Jamie asked, and she nodded and said, “Yes. He was . . . he was a pro. He was good. I mean, the way you talked about him once, what his reputation is? I could see it in action. He was impressive.” When Claire stopped talking, she noticed that Jamie wasn’t meeting her eyes and was suddenly very interested in the concrete floor in front of his chair. She couldn’t bring herself to ask him what was wrong, felt sure she didn’t want to know whatever was preventing him from meeting her gaze. He finally brought his eyes back up to hers and said in a flat tone, “I got those codes deciphered.” The codes. The codes in her uncle’s books. With everything else going on, Claire had completely forgotten even giving Jamie the books. Her heart sank and her stomach clenched in dread. “Those books your uncle used to collect all those years ago? Those Cyrillic codes you found and gave to me, I had MI-5 look at them.”

“Yes?” Claire said, the only syllable she could manage over the lump rising in her throat. “Aye,” Jamie said, standing from his chair and crossing the room to hand her a file. She started looking through it, but it all seemed a blur to her. She knew she could get answers faster from him, so she asked, “What is this?”

“Directives. Confirmed KGB orders,” Jamie said. “What kind of orders? What do they mean?” Claire asked him, unable to stop herself despite everything shouting for her to simply cover her ears and not listen anymore. Jamie heaved the biggest sigh she’d ever heard from him and her heart sank even further. Then he answered, “A list of aliases. Handles. People.”

“Who?” Claire felt like every question was taking a step closer to the edge of a cliff. She could nearly see over the side now. “Those are official code names given by MI-6 to over a dozen of our officers, all of whom were killed,” Jamie said. Claire was still barely managing more than one word at a time. This time all she got out was, “What?”

“Twenty-five years ago, all killed by an unknown foreign agent, an agent MI-6 suspected was KGB. Yer suspicions about yer uncle having once worked for the KGB? They’re accurate,” he told her, and Claire felt her world tilt. But although she’d suspected Lamb of being responsible for all sorts of horrible things, this seemed a bridge too far, especially after everything they’d just been through together in Jamaica. She knew it wasn’t completely rational, but she felt compelled to
defend him. “We don’t know that for sure,” she said. Jamie met her gaze without flinching and reminded her, “We know yer uncle was being tracked by counterintelligence.” Claire shook her head and tried again. It was, she imagined, very like being a struggling animal caught in a trap. “He said that was routine.”

“There is nothing routine about that list,” Jamie said forcefully. “There is something very specific about it. It’s been a mystery in the agency for over two decades: who murdered those MI-6 officers? I’m sorry, Claire. But we have our answer now. It was your uncle. I’m going to report him.” Claire closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead to try to counteract the throbbing headache that had arisen there. She and Jamie exchanged very few words during her remaining time at the warehouse. They didn’t touch each other, didn’t kiss each other goodbye. Their bodies and spirits were as disconnected as they’d ever been at almost any point since they met. Claire had already been forced to accept that one major aspect of her life was a lie. But even believing OB8 to be the evil corrupt organization they were paled in comparison to believing her uncle, her only surviving family, to be a foreign agent and a murderer a dozen times over. Claire swallowed some pills for her headache with a large gulp of water then pointed her car toward the Credit Geopárd building. As good as she was at compartmentalizing, she didn’t know if she had a compartment big enough to contain the news she’d be carrying into the office.

Lamb sat across from Randall in his office, his face a kaleidoscope of colors from all the bruises and wounds in various stages of healing from his time in Jamaica. Randall looked him over and said, “I’m glad you’re back safe. To tell you the truth, I was a little nervous.”

“You know I’ve been through far worse than Kingston,” Lamb said simply. “We both have.”

“Yes, of course. When I didn’t hear from you, I thought maybe al-Ashar had gotten a lead. Maybe he knew you were coming,” Randall said, tilting his head slightly to one side, considering. “I was unsure of that myself,” Lamb admitted, “but it all worked out.”

“Not for al-Ashar,” Randall said with a chilling smile. He rose from his desk chair and walked to his office door, Lamb rising to follow and saying, “No, not for him.”

“Thank you,” Randall told Lamb, and Lamb simply shrugged and answered, “It’s my job.” They both walked out of Randall’s office and headed for the briefing room to meet the others.

Claire kept her features completely neutral when she saw the staged pictures of al-Ashar’s body appear on the monitors. She was already seated around the conference table with Joe and Ned when Randall and her uncle arrived. Randall started the briefing by pointing at the pictures and saying, “A vicious murder. Yousef al-Ashar has been executed. We may never know who’s responsible for this killing, but what we do know is that as soon as news of al-Ashar’s death spread, this man was unusually busy. This is Milo Zappas. He worked very closely with al-Ashar. Some considered him al-Ashar’s second. For the past two days he’s been scrambling to contact al-Ashar’s old clients. Seems he’s looking to take over al-Ashar’s work.”

“Do you think he had al-Ashar killed?” Joe asked, and Randall shrugged his shoulders, clearly unconcerned with the cause or manner of al-Ashar’s death. “Perhaps,” he answered Joe. “Or maybe he’s just taking advantage of an opportunity. We intercepted this call last night.” Randall pushed a button and played the audio of the intercepted phone call between Zappas and an unknown associate. Zappas said, “I know that before his death you were in talks with Mr. al-Ashar.” The other man answered, “Yes, there was a discussion of a certain package.” Zappas responded, “I am in possession of this package myself. I’m taking bids right now.” Claire looked up at Randall and said, “What package?”
“For months we’ve been hearing rumors about a new device al-Ashar had commissioned. We don’t know what it is. But al-Ashar was an arms dealer with access to nuclear weapons, so we need to know. This is Club Scorpion, Zappas’ cover. He keeps an office there. Zappas has set up a meeting with potential clients Thursday night at this nightclub,” Randall told them as he handed them their mission files. “Your job is to go to Greece, break into Zappas’ office, and retrieve the specs on this mysterious package. Ned.”

“Right,” Ned said as he stood, smiling at them. “What we’ve learned so far is that Zappas has a biometric access panel on his office door that requires a retinal scan to open, so we have a high-resolution retinal scanner,” he told them, holding up a pair of rose-tinted glasses. “They work up to about thirty feet. Now, Miss Beauchamp, you’ll put these on, then find the person whose retina you want, in this case Zappas, and you want to make direct solid eye contact with him. Look him right in the eye. Then Mr. Abernathy, you log on and hit the ‘scan’ key on the terminal. It should take about ten seconds. I know that’s a bit of a long time but look at this. This is a silicone and fluoropolymer compound that makes a set of contact lenses that the retina reader will accept.” Claire smiled at Ned, truly amazed at his work, and then looked over at Joe. They both knew all too well how many things seemed simple while sitting in the briefing room that turned out to be anything but simple in the field.

When the briefing ended and everyone dispersed, Claire found herself alone in the room with Lamb. Her head still spinning from everything Jamie had told her, she could barely look him in the eye. He pulled out his signal jammer so they could speak openly without any electronic eavesdropping. Lamb seemed unsure of himself as he began, saying, “In Jamaica, I should have said that . . . I wanted to say thank you for coming. I know that was something that you certainly didn’t have to do.” Claire felt her heart bleeding with every word, knowing how rare it was for him to reach across the divide of their relationship but feeling it to be the worst possible moment for him to do so. She choked out a small, “It’s alright,” then turned to try to leave, wanting desperately to escape and preserve whatever fragments of her heart she could. “Wait,” Lamb said and reached out with a hand on her arm to halt her progress. She turned back to face him and bit her lip, trying to keep her warring emotions at bay. “There’s something else. There are so many things I should probably do. I mean, as your uncle, your adoptive parent. Things I should say and ask.” Unable to stop herself, Claire reached out to grip his arm in return. “Lamb, it’s alright. Really,” she said, not knowing if it ever truly would be alright between them again. The signal jammer beeped to let them know their window of secrecy had ended. Claire gave her uncle a weak smile then left the briefing room to go find Ned and Joe.

At an MI-6 safehouse in Inverness, Jamie walked into the guarded living room area where Yousef al-Ashar was picking over a plate of food in obvious disgust. Jamie stood over him and said cheerfully, “Not sae bad here, is it?” Al-Ashar set his fork down on the coffee table, looked up at Jamie with eyes full of contempt, and said, “This is not the deal I agreed to.”

“So, what can ye tell me about the package?” Jamie asked, not bothering to address al-Ashar’s previous statement. After a few moments of silence, Jamie said, “Och, come on, you’re going to have to help me out here because under our anti-terrorism laws, yer not going anywhere. So, what I recommend is that you and I work together, and I’ll make sure you stay comfortable. Ye wouldna believe it but there are some incredibly nice prisons in this country. Either that, or you don’t cooperate and let’s just say yer not going to like your cellmates so much, aye? Now, ye don’t have to trust me. But it might save you some misery. What’s the package?” Al-Ashar stood from his armchair and walked to the other side of the room, not speaking for several moments. Then he seemed to come to a decision as he turned back to face Jamie. He said, “Listen. I have a wife and a son. They are targets, not just from OB8. I’ve made many enemies in the past. Now you bring
them to the UK, give them protection. You do that for me, and I’ll tell you whatever you want to know. Everything.” Jamie casually placed his hands in the pockets of his dress slacks and said simply, “Let me make one thing very clear, Mr. al-Ashar. The extent to which I am willing to service you is when I offer you a soda. There is no room for negotiations. There are no perks coming your way. You have nothing to gain here.”

“Then neither do you,” al-Ashar shot back, turning his back on Jamie once again in a gesture of defiance and dismissal. “You should think about that,” Jamie told him, but al-Ashar shook his head without turning around and said, “I don’t have to.”

“I’ll give you some time to think about that,” Jamie repeated, then nodded once to the guard sitting against the wall before he walked out of the room.

Claire and Jamie both stood outside their cars in an industrial area outside Inverness so Claire could get her counter mission for Greece. The distance between them was both physical and emotional, almost as if another being were inhabiting their meeting, their conversation, the breath that seemed too thick in their lungs, the words that sat unspoken in their mouths. They went forward the only way they knew how: putting all their focus into the task at hand. “Whatever the package is, al-Ashar isn’t talking,” Jamie told Claire. “So, here’s the plan. You’ll put on the contact lenses, get into Zappas’ office and record the specs. You, not Joe.” He handed her a box. It reminded her of when he’d given her the blue vase and her heart squeezed painfully in her chest. Nothing personal about this. Just work. She opened the lid and saw what looked like a women’s vanity set. “The compact’s a camera, the lipstick’s a voice recorder, and the lighter’s a flash drive. Whatever info you can get, get it for us,” he told her, then handed her a file as she replaced the lid on the box. “These are some unclassified designs for various weapons. You’ll photograph these with whatever camera OB8 gives you. That’s what you’ll give them when you get back.”

“Thanks,” Claire told him, and just as she had with Lamb, she turned to leave to try to salvage what she could of a heart that felt like it was cracking down the middle. “Listen,” Jamie said, and she paused, waiting but not turning back to face him. “About yer uncle. I know you’re reluctant to do anything.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that,” Claire said, turning back around. “Ye know what we have to do,” Jamie told her, and Claire dropped her head. “We have to report him to HQ in London. Now, I can do it myself but those are your books. They’ll need your testimony to make a case against him.” There was still a large part of Claire frozen in disbelief. How could she be talking about turning in her uncle, accepting his culpability in such horrible crimes? How could she even be thinking about testifying against him? Worst of all, how could she be in a position where it seemed she had to choose between the two men she loved most in the world? “He might have been part of the KGB,” Claire admitted, though she could barely spit the words out. “But we don’t know what role he played in those murders.”

“You’re kidding yourself, Claire, and you know that,” Jamie said, raising his voice, and Claire winced. “Let’s just say he was guilty. The directives are twenty-five years old,” Claire argued, and Jamie immediately responded, “There is no statute of limitations on murder!” Taking a deep breath, Claire struggled for calm. Why couldn’t they seem to discuss this rationally? “We need him right now. We will never destroy OB8 without my uncle,” Claire said, and Jamie seemed to pause at that for a moment before turning back to his car and retrieving a large file. He handed it to her and allowed her to look through it for a few minutes before he spoke again. “Those code names in your uncle’s books? They were people. And they risked their lives- all of them- for this country. It might have been twenty-five years ago. But for each of those lives lost, others were destroyed.”
“I know,” Claire said gently, and to her surprise Jamie shot back loudly, “No, you don’t know because you’re not thinking about them! You’re only thinking of yourself!” Now it was Jamie’s turn to pause and take a deep breath and reach for his calm. He pierced Claire with the depths of his blue eyes and said more gently, “You made a connection with your uncle for the first time in a long time and turning him in would mean sacrificing that. I understand. But Claire, we have proof. We know who the victims are—you’re holding them in your hands. And we know who the killer was. And we both know the right thing to do.” Claire handed the file back to him and noticed the subtle trembling in her hands as she did so. Sighing deeply, she said, “Yes. My uncle probably got his KGB orders from the books. And yes, it looks like my uncle was responsible for those deaths. But what you’re asking me to do... I just need some time. Not a lot of time. Not forever. Just, please. You won’t do anything about this without me?” He shook his head and she nodded, climbed into her car and drove towards home to pack for her trip to Greece. As he watched her drive away, Jamie reached into the inner pocket of his overcoat and pulled out the tape recorder he’d hidden there before Claire’s arrival. He backed up the recording and played back her words, her voice declaring her uncle’s probable guilt. He slammed the stop button and closed his eyes, feeling sick to his stomach over what he’d done. An eternity in front of the punching bag wouldn’t be enough to clear this mess from his system, so he went home, and stared at the tape recorder with a glass of whisky in his hand deep into the night.

The music in Club Scorpion was pulsing and loud, the lights flashing and bright, the dancers behind clear plexiglass swaying and barely clad. Claire moved through the crowded club wearing a red choppy wig and a short dress with red fringe. Wearing the retina scanning glasses Ned created, she looked around the room for her target. But it was too crowded, too many bodies, and she said to Joe, “I’m going to need another set of eyes.” Making his way to the security office in the basement of the building, Joe replied, “I’m working on it, LJ.” After talking the guard into opening the door (in Greek), Joe quickly knocked him out and sat down in front of the bank of surveillance camera monitors. “Give me a minute to locate Zappas,” he told Claire. “Ok, found him. He’s through the glass door.” Joe set up the contact lens maker on the desk in front of him while Claire made her way to the glass door and charmed her way past the guard posted there.

Zappas was sitting in a booth in the corner surrounded by women, but as soon as Claire entered the room, he had eyes for no one else. Claire held his gaze and said in a low voice to Joe, her mouth barely moving, “He’s looking right at me. You have anything yet?”

“I’m not getting a lock on the retinas,” Joe told her. “The lights in the club must be disrupting the signal. You’ll have to get closer.”

“How much closer?” Claire asked. Joe responded with some trepidation in his voice, knowing just how much he was asking, “In this lighting? How’s two inches?”

“Great,” Claire said, her voice dripping with more sarcasm than Joe had ever heard from her. Turning on every ounce of her charm and acting skills, Claire crooked her finger at Zappas, signaling him to come to her. He instantly moved to comply, gesturing the other women in the booth out of his way. When he was standing in front of her, Claire said, “I understand you’re the owner of the club.” Zappas raised an eyebrow and said, “Ah, you are American.” Giving herself an internal pat on the back for her flawless and well-practiced American accent, Claire said, “That’s right. God bless America.” Through her earpiece, she heard Joe say, “I’m getting it, LJ. Hold for ten seconds.”

“Your dancers suck,” Claire said to Zappas as she wrapped her arms around him, keeping his eyes locked on her to give the retinal scanner a chance to work. “Suck?” Zappas laughed. “You think you could do a better job?” Before Claire had a chance to answer, one of the guards in the room
came up behind Zappas and tapped him on the shoulder. He said, “Sir, your 11 o’clock just arrived. He’s by the poolside bar.” Zappas had turned his head when the guard spoke to him and Joe told Claire, “No good. We didn’t get a read.” Claire was pondering killing Ned when she returned to Inverness when Zappas turned back to her and said, “I have a very important meeting with a client. But follow me.” She went with him and the guard to another room down the hall and immediately pulled him close when the door closed. Counting down the seconds in her head, Zappas said, “I’ll be back in ten minutes.” Six, five, four, three . . . “I can’t wait,” she told him with a smile and a voice full of promise. She held onto him a moment longer and then as he left the room, she finally heard Joe in her ear saying, “Got it.” Unfortunately, the guard hadn’t left the room with Zappas but stayed to guard Claire. “Contacts are ready, LJ. Meet me by the restrooms,” Joe said.

Turning to the guard, Claire told him, “Excuse me, I have to go.” Immediately shaking his head, he said, “Mr. Zappas has invited you to stay,” as if there should be no further discussion on the matter. Claire tried again and told the burly guard, “I need a drink.”

“We’ll be happy to have whatever you like brought here,” he said simply. Moving towards the door, Claire said, “I would rather get it myself.” The guard put his hand on her shoulder and turned her back to face him. “I think you will be much more comfortable if you stay here,” he said more emphatically, and Claire had had enough. “Oh really?” she said, then grabbed his hand on her arm, twisted his arm behind his back and brought his head down at the same time her knee came up. It took some work, but she finally knocked him out. Joe had heard her struggling and said into her ear, “You ok?”

“Yes, but I’m locked in this pervert’s room,” Claire told him as she searched the guard for his keys. Joe had already been on the move, so he made a quick decision and told her, “I’m closer to Zappas’ office and I have the contacts.” Knowing her counter mission wouldn’t have a chance if she didn’t get out, Claire tried to stall her partner as she flipped through the massive key ring, trying each one in the lock. “No, Joe, I really want to do this myself.” But he was already putting the contacts into his own eyes as he continued towards the office. “I’ll download the blueprints of the package from Zappas’ computer,” he told her, and when she tried again to stop him, he cut her off and said firmly, “Just get out of there in one piece! I’ll meet you outside when I’m done!” By then, he had already reached the retinal scanner on the wall outside Zappas’ office. The contacts worked perfectly, and the door lock disengaged. Joe sat down behind the desk and worked quickly to download the files.

Claire was still hoping she could catch him when she finally found the right key to unlock the door. She took off quickly but had to change direction to avoid another guard who’d seen her with Zappas earlier. She paused as she came back into the heart of the club, trying to get her bearings and figure out the quickest way to get to the office. But before she could choose a direction, she was pinned in place with her arms behind her back; the same guard she’d knocked out earlier was a solid wall of flesh behind her, breathing heavily in her ear and clearly out for revenge. Zappas appeared moments later and walked up to her laughing as she struggled against the guard’s iron grip. “Are you auditioning to be a dancer or a bouncer?” he asked her sarcastically. Moving closer, he came into her space, into her face as she had his earlier, but with menace instead of promise. “Hmm,” he said when there was almost no space left between them. “I can’t really decide if you are my . . . taste.” With no way to move and nowhere to go, Claire could only close her eyes and try to hold down her bile when he extended his tongue and licked her face from her chin, up the side of her nose, all the way to her hairline. Then, Joe burst through the door behind them and shouted her name, pulling the guard off her back so she could take out Zappas. They both fought their individual battles successfully, though Claire’s took slightly longer as she did not have the element of surprise. Joe shouted, “LJ, let’s go!” as soon as Zappas hit the floor and together they escaped into the sultry Greek night.
Jamie, feeling somewhat revived after a session with the punching bag that morning before work, headed back to the safehouse for another conversation with al-Ashar. He found him in almost the exact same position he’d been in on his last visit, sitting in an armchair picking over a plate of food with obvious distaste. “How’s the food?” Jamie asked with more cheer than he felt. “So, Mr. al-Ashar, you’ve had some time to think about it. You want to help me out?”

“Screw you,” al-Ashar said without looking up, and Jamie sighed. He hadn’t really expected anything, but he was still frustrated. “Screw me?” Jamie echoed back, pacing himself, not wanting to lose control. “Screw you. I don’t talk to you unless you show me some respect,” al-Ashar spat. Jamie smiled, a smile that chilled rather than warmed, a smile that had sent hardened criminals scurrying for cover. In a straightforward tone, Jamie said as he came around the armchair and looked al-Ashar directly in the eye, “Let’s be honest here. In twenty minutes, you’re going to be shipped off to a maximum-security prison outside Inverness. By 5 pm, you’re going to be someone’s after-dinner meal. So, unless you start cooperating with me really fast, respect is going to be the least of your problems.” After a short beat of silence, Jamie turned to leave the room. Before he reached the door, he pulled up short when al-Ashar said, “Wait.” Slowly turning back, Jamie watched al-Ashar stand up from the armchair and ask, “You still refuse to help get my family out of Chile?”

“I told you, that’s not part of the deal,” Jamie answered. “But if you help me out, I’ll make sure you stay comfortable.” After a few long moments staring each other down across the room, al-Ashar looked down at the floor for a second before saying, “Ok. I have a stockpile of weapons. Not in Egypt- I knew that’s where my enemies would look. The package and the other weapons are in a silo in Greece on the island of Santorini.” Jamie couldn’t believe he’d finally convinced al-Ashar to cooperate. At least something in his life was going right.

In the bloodmobile on campus, Claire was recounting the story of her mission in Greece. Pausing, in part for dramatic effect and in part to make sure she wasn’t going to vomit in the retelling, she said slowly, “He licked my face.” Though his fingers began tapping an incessant drumbeat on his thigh, Jamie tried to play it cool by responding simply, “I understand.” Claire shook her head, leaned closer to him, and gestured broadly with her hands, saying, “You don’t, really. He. Licked. My. Face. And you want to know the worst part? Because of him, I didn’t succeed. Because of him, Joe accessed the information, MI-6 got nothing, and OB8 ended up with what they wanted. I want to go to Santorini myself. I want to find the stockpile al-Ashar told you about, get the package, and bring it back.” Jamie felt a surge of admiration for Claire’s persistence but shook his head. “I just don’t feel it’s the right time for MI-6 to send you anywhere without OB8’s knowledge. We just did that with Jamaica. I think it’s too dangerous.”

“Then we can use my uncle,” Claire insisted. “He can give Randall the intel. We’ll make it an OB8 mission.” It was a good plan. Jamie knew it was a good plan. He knew the more difficult part of their meeting was still to come, so he simply nodded and said, “Aye. That’s not why I called ye, though.”

“I know,” Claire began, and her words quickly gained momentum as she spoke. “Listen, if we turn in my uncle, it will jeopardize what you and I are doing here . . .” Claire’s voice trailed off as she heard her own voice being played from a tape recorder Jamie held in his hand. She recognized the words they’d spoken to each other during their last conversation prior to her trip to Greece, the words she’d spoken about her uncle. Claire had to turn away from Jamie for a moment, wrapping her arms around herself, feeling the weight of his betrayal like a physical blow. His voice reached to her softly across the space between them and she uncurled herself slightly with each word. “I figured turning in your uncle would be too difficult for you. So, I made this tape the last time we were together. I was going to play it for Munro, maybe use it in court someday. But I couldna bring
myself to do that.” When she turned back to face him, Jamie placed the tape in her hand. Then he
continued, “I’m telling ye this because I couldn’t lie to ye, Sassenach, not with all that’s between us.
I owe ye the truth. And I know this is a personal thing for ye. The idea of reporting yer uncle is a
horrible position to be in. But it’s a personal thing for me too, Claire. Those files that I gave ye of
the MI-6 officers who were killed? I left one out.”

Then he handed her a file. She looked at him with a question in her eyes and he merely nodded and
gestured for her to look. When she opened the file, her knees nearly buckled, and she sank down
into the chair next to his when she saw the picture on the first page. He resembled Jamie’s sister
more than Jamie himself, but even before she saw the name Fraser, Brian printed next to the picture
she knew it was him. He had dark hair like Jenny and a full dark beard. His eyes were kind and
even with the standard “no expression” agency photo, she could see a smile about to break forth
from beneath the surface. The page was a summary of a career, a life, cut short. The words “FILE
CLOSED” stamped across his employee status seemed to sear her eyes, her tears welling
automatically. She looked up at Brian’s son, eyes full of pain and love and compassion and
understanding, and he said, “I made an appointment to meet with Munro on Monday to report yer
uncle. Are ye with me?” She nodded, reached her hand out to thread into the curls at his nape, and
pulled him forward so their foreheads touched each other. The gulf was bridged. And though her
heart felt fragmented into thousands of pieces and it was difficult to breathe, Claire knew she had no
choice. One man she loved would have justice by the fall of the other.

When Claire walked into OB8 later that day, she did a brush pass and handed Lamb a folded piece
of paper, which he smoothly tucked into a leather folder under his arm without anyone being the
wiser to its presence. As she kept walking, she looked back once over her shoulder, attempting to
communicate without words the urgency of the situation. Minutes later, in a quiet corner, Lamb read
the note:

Lamb- I know you’ve made mistakes. We both have. And I know that given the chance, you’d go
back, take a different path, that you’d right the things you did wrong. My point is, something went
wrong last week, and I have the chance to correct it. But I need your help. Please. You must make
Randall believe you’ve received intel about al-Ashar’s weapons stockpile.

A short time later, after a brief visit to Randall’s office, Claire’s head was spinning over her uncle’s
efficiency as she found herself in the briefing room with him and Randall. Clearly, the note and
Lamb’s communication of the intel to Randall had the desired outcome. Randall had a picture up on
the screen of a small piece of equipment, smaller than a dinner plate. He pointed at it and told Claire,
“You’re looking at an EM refractor, used to cloak missiles. We believe this is the package we’ve
been trying to find. It’s being stored on the island of Santorini. Thanks to your uncle’s Middle
Eastern contacts, we know where to go.”

“Good work,” she said to him across the table, keeping her face carefully neutral. He merely nodded
in response. Randall handed her a file and told her, “Go meet with Ned. He’ll give you the op tech.
You leave in the morning. This is a precision insertion so you’re going in alone.”

“Ok,” Claire replied, and before long the briefing was over. She was going back to Greece, thanks
to Lamb. As grateful as she was for his assistance, she was also grateful she didn’t have to face him
again before her meeting with Jamie and Munro. She didn’t know if she would be strong enough to
follow through with what she knew she needed to do if he had another opportunity to tug at her
heart.
Under cover of darkness the following night, Claire knelt in the tall grass on a hill in Santorini. Through her binoculars, she could see Zappas emerging from an underground staircase and said into her com, “Zappas is leaving the bunker.” Back in the field surveillance room at MI-6 in Inverness, Jamie, Ian, al-Ashar and a few tech officers were gathered and watching the satellite feed on the monitors. Jamie always felt an extra level of comfort when he could see what Claire saw, could hear her voice and respond to her when she was in the field. He always relished the opportunity to have a hands-on role in keeping her safe. “We’ve got him on satellite relay, Claire,” he told her, and since he had a better view than she did, she asked him, “Do you see any guards?”

“Al-Ashar says there won’t be any. The building was designed to look abandoned. The EM refractor is in a secure depot underground,” Jamie responded. “Copy that,” Claire told him, and began to move down the hill as Zappas got in his car and drove off. Jamie leaned over Ian’s shoulder and told him, “Go to infrared.” Ian switched over the view on the satellite images, but the only glowing sign of heat on the display was from Claire. Fitting, that, Jamie thought to himself with an internal smirk. Ian turned his head to his brother-in-law and said, “It’s clear.” Then, Jamie said, “Claire, you’re clear.” And with that, she opened the large, heavy door by pulling up and allowing it to swing to the side. It reminded her of pictures she’d seen of tornado shelters in the United States. She turned on her flashlight and went down the stairs into the blackness of the underground silo. “Ok, I’m in. Where to?”

“There’s another stairwell to your left. Go down to the lower level,” Jamie told her, and Claire silently complied. When she got to the bottom, she did a quick spin around with her light and then told Jamie, “It’s a dead end.” Jamie turned and pinned al-Ashar with a hard glare. Sounding almost bored, al-Ashar explained, “There is a valve halfway up on the left. She needs to turn it clockwise.”

“Claire, turn to your left. There’s a valve; turn it clockwise.”

“Copy,” Claire replied, and used her flashlight to quickly locate the valve. Al-Ashar then said to Jamie, “A panel will open. She’ll find a keypad behind it.”

“You should find a keypad,” Jamie relayed to Claire, and he could hear her turning the valve. Claire could see the light from the electronic keypad on the wall as soon as the panel opened. “What’s the code?” she asked Jamie. “Code,” Jamie barked at al-Ashar, and after a pause, al-Ashar told him, “Pi to six digits.”

“The code is 314159,” Jamie said to Claire, and Ian turned and looked over his shoulder at Jamie with sarcastic surprise. With a look at Ian that clearly said I’ll deal with you later, Jamie waited for Claire to enter the code. The large metal door slid open and Claire found herself in a room that could only be described as organized chaos. It was a large, open room with stacks of boxes and crates of all sizes and materials. There was no chance she was going to be able to find something small like the EM refractor without some guidance. “Where do I look?” she asked Jamie, and he told her that she was looking for black shipping cases. She found a stack towards the back of the room and started opening them one at a time, moving them to the side when she found they didn’t contain what she was seeking. On the third or fourth case in the stack, she finally struck gold. “I found the refractor,” she told Jamie, but just as she was closing the lid on the case, the metal door on the other side of the room started to slide closed. She picked up the case and ran full speed to try to reach the door before it closed completely but she was seconds too late. Then, the room went dark. Even though low-level emergency lighting came on moments later, Claire knew something was very wrong. “Jamie, I think this is a setup . . . Jamie, what is going on? The room just went into lockdown.”

“What the hell did you do?” Jamie roared at al-Ashar, and ever so calmly, as if he were ordering his favorite cappuccino, he answered, “I gave you the wrong code. Your agent has activated an anti-
intruder device. In a few seconds, the room will be filled with gasoline. Exactly one minute after that, a flame will ignite.” The exact process that al-Ashar was describing to Jamie started to happen before Claire’s eyes while he was still talking, as a large valve that looked like a sprinkler head came down from the ceiling. “Jamie, talk to me,” Claire said, her voice full of fear. Jamie, nearly shaking with rage and terror, pulled his gun and pointed it at the middle of al-Ashar’s face. “Give me the deactivation code.” Claire immediately shut her eyes tightly and covered her nose and mouth with her hand as the first drop of gasoline hit her in the face. “JAMIE?”

Despite the gun in his face, al-Ashar shook his head at Jamie and said, “I won’t give you the code until I have an agreement, in writing, signed by your superiors, guaranteeing that my family will be brought to the UK and protected.” Jamie cocked the gun, took a step closer to al-Ashar, and said in a voice full of menace, “Give me the code, you son of a bitch, or I’ll pull the trigger.”

“I have no doubt that’s true,” al-Ashar said, still calm as a glassy lake at dawn. As much as Jamie wanted to do just what he’d threatened, he knew he was beaten. If he killed al-Ashar, there was no hope to save Claire. He stared into the other man’s eyes a second longer, then ripped off his headset and threw it down, shouting to Ian as he ran out of the room, “Start typing!” By the time Ian managed to choke out, “ME?” Jamie was already sprinting up the stairs. Jamie was thankful to God for every single minute he’d ever spent in the gym and still feared it wouldn’t be enough as he ran full speed up the stairwell in the MI-6 building with only one goal in mind: get to Munro’s office. As he ran, Claire was coughing and sputtering as gasoline continued to fill the bunker and the fumes continued to fill her lungs. She knew Jamie had to be working on something, some solution to get her out of this mess. She only hoped it would be soon. At the same time, Ian was typing up the protection agreement for al-Ashar’s family with the man himself looking over his shoulder. “You spelled ‘Yousef’ wrong,” al-Ashar said as he pointed at the screen, and without pause, Ian simply said, “SHUT UP,” and kept typing.

As if he had a stopwatch in his head, Jamie was counting down the seconds they had left until the flame ignited when he burst through the door of Munro’s office with no knock, no announcement of his intentions. “Sorry, Mr. Munro,” he said breathlessly as Munro looked up and said incredulously, “What are you doing?”

“If I don’t get your signature on a protection order for Yousef al-Ashar’s family in the next forty seconds, Claire Beauchamp will die,” Jamie said, then thanked God again that for an older man Munro was still very quick-thinking and amazingly fit, keeping up with him stride-for-stride as they hurtled back down the stairs. The protection order was just coming out of the printer when they came through the door of the surveillance room and Munro had a pen in his hand in the next instant, though they had to replace it with another when it ran dry. Jamie shoved the paper in front of al-Ashar and said, “Give me the code.” Al-Ashar skimmed over the paper once before answering, “766153.” Jamie already had his headset back on and shouted to Claire, “Code is 766153!” Barely able to see the keypad through the stinging of her eyes, Claire typed in the code and the gasoline shut off. Claire choked out, “Jamie, thank you,” and he bent forward with his hands on the counter and closed his eyes in exhausted relief. But before Claire had a chance to respond, the metal door slid open and Zappas ran into the room with his gun drawn. He’d been alerted as soon as the anti-intruder device was activated and turned back to the bunker. Claire threw up her hands and shouted, “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! The room is full of gasoline!”

Ever the practical man, Zappas simply put away his gun and pulled out a knife. “What the hell are you doing?” he asked her, recognizing her from Club Scorpion. He didn’t bother to wait to find out the answer as he lunged at her with the knife. Claire dodged, punched, and kicked until their positions in the room were reversed. When he lunged at her with the knife again, Claire ducked and moved to the side and the knife connected with the alarm control panel. She shoved Zappas to the ground and took off running, knowing she had only seconds to get out. Sure enough, as she was
climbing the last flight of stairs, the alarm panel sparked and Zappas screamed into the void as the entire bunker and all the remaining weapons stockpile went up in a massive explosion. It pushed Claire the rest of the way out the door and onto the ground outside, but other than being winded, bruised, and in dire need of a shower, she was unharmed. And a few feet away from her on the ground, the black shipping case containing the EM refractor lay intact and ready to be delivered to MI-6.

Jamie was waiting for Claire just inside the entrance to the storage warehouse in Inverness when she walked in, a to-go cup of tea in one hand and the refractor case in the other. He took a moment when she entered to simply drink in her beauty, made even more striking in his gratitude for having her home safely once again. Her curls were shiny and bouncing around her shoulders and face, her skin luminescent in its natural state with barely a hint of makeup to accent her features. She was conservatively dressed for work, but her skirt suit and overcoat were fitted enough that he got a tantalizing view of her curves. And the high heels she wore made her legs seem to go on for miles. He was, quite simply, frozen in awe of her. When she walked up to him, set the case down next to his feet, and placed a gentle kiss on his lips, he told her so. “You’re amazing, Sassenach,” he told her, and meant it in every possible way. She blushed and lowered her head and he adored her more for it. “I am not amazing,” she denied, but he would not hear a refusal. “You did a great job,” he said firmly, lifting her chin so she would meet his eyes and know his sincerity. “You sure you’re ready to meet with Munro tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Claire affirmed, having come to at least some amount of acceptance of what she had to do. She also couldn’t deny to herself, although she wouldn’t say so to Jamie, that there might still be some hope of another explanation for what had happened all those years ago. “Alright. A taxi will pick you up at three o’clock tomorrow afternoon, northwest corner of Crown and Longman. We’ll get you into the office through the underground garage,” Jamie explained, and Claire nodded her understanding. “Now, in the meantime . . . I have a wee surprise for ye. Close yer eyes, a neighan.” Claire cocked an eyebrow at him and smiled, clearly uncertain of his intentions but also very curious as to what he had planned. And then he disarmed her completely with a single question: “Do ye trust me, Claire?” Her answer was the absolute truth and given without a moment’s hesitation. “With my life,” she said, and knew in the deepest parts of herself that even blind, she would follow him anywhere. “And with yer heart?” he asked, and she realized that he needed reassurance from their recent misunderstandings and estrangements as much as she did. “Always,” she told him, and knew it to be just as true. He leaned his forehead into hers, then brushed their lips together gently once again. “Then close yer eyes.”

He wrapped one arm around her waist and grabbed one of her hands with his other so he could guide her through the warehouse with her eyes closed. She stumbled once and giggled several times but eventually Jamie brought her to a stop and told her to open her eyes. She blinked a few times to adjust and then couldn’t prevent her jaw from dropping to the floor. The first thing she noticed were the candles (battery-powered for safety, but gorgeous nonetheless), what seemed like hundreds, surrounding them and illuminating the space in a soft, yellow glow. The space where they’d met in secret dozens of times was draped with sheer white fabrics all around, softening the concrete and chain link and cardboard and wooden crates into something that looked like it had been visited by the faeries. And in the center, the item that for all its simplicity completely stole her breath: a simple but sturdy wooden-framed bed.

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