Third Time's The Charm

by lcbeauchampofarth

Summary

Jamie and Claire Fraser are reunited in 1764 after nearly 18 years apart. They make the decision to settle down in Edinburgh, and life gives them another chance at a dream long denied to them.

Notes

This is my first ever fic for the Outlander community (and in general), and I thank you all so much for taking the time to read this story that is so precious to me. If you like Tumblr, you can find me at @lcbeauchampofarth, where I'll be posting as well. Look for updates every Saturday!

Thank you again for giving this story a chance. <3
Prologue

June 1766

My body felt every bit of my 45 years of age as I gracelessly chased the squealing toddler around my shop. Ever since she had learned to walk a few months ago, her tiny yet chubby legs propelled her everywhere she desired to go. My clothes were covered in soot after a long day of printing, but that didn’t stop me from trying to make her laugh as loudly as possible, even though I knew her mother would have words for me for getting the tiny mischief-maker’s dress dirty.

“Mo chuisle, a leannan, I’m coming for ye!”

She shrieked in delight at my teasing and her running proved futile as I scooped her up in my arms. I kissed her relentlessly on her cheeks, momentarily thinking that although her dark curly hair would likely hide any trace of my failure to clean up before taking her into my arms, her dirt-covered face would give me away.

I heard a sudden gasp from above, and my eyes immediately locked with those of a young woman standing on the balcony overlooking my printing press. Her fiery red hair, blue eyes, and emotive face conveyed a haunting sense of familiarity that I struggled to rationalize.

Realizing it was no longer just me and the wee bairn, I cleared my throat and adopted my somewhat professional demeanor. “Good evenin’, can I help ye, mistress?” I adjusted the positioning of my mini stage-three clinger, who currently had her arms wrapped tightly around my neck as if holding on for dear life, and propped her on my hip. As I walked up the stairs towards the visitor, my mind continued to fight against the frighteningly supernatural sense that overwhelmed my thought process: you know this lass.

“I—” she started, seemingly unable to decide how she wanted continue her sentence. “I....it’s you two that I’m looking for.”

Confused, I briefly glanced down at the whisky eyes innocently staring back at me before focusing back on the woman.

“I’m sorry, mistress, I’m no’ sure what ye mean.”

She took a step back, eyes glued to the floor. Her clearly evident nerves began to take a toll on my own heart rate, but I didn’t want to further scare the poor girl. She looks so much like my mother, I fleetingly thought, hoping that the eerily similar physical comparison adequately explained why goosebumps had slowly traveled down my arms from the moment I saw her.

“Have ye a message for me, lass?”

January 1764, two and a half years earlier

“Pardon?” I nervously blurted out, reaching my hand to gently touch the shoulder of the delivery boy that looked as if he might know about Jamie’s whereabouts. “I’m looking for a printer. Mr. Malcolm. Alexander Malcolm?”
“Aye!” he answered, his eyes reflecting his immediate shift from confusion to recognition. “He’s located at the end of Carfax Close, which’ll be the first on yer left.”

With that quick confirmation, my heart froze. I realized that I had long been preparing myself for the likelihood that I’d reach a dead end in my quest to find Jamie — that my hope of finding him would never truly materialize, but would instead remain within the four corners of the copy of the printed poem firmly grasped in my hands.

After thanking the boy and watching him walk away, I took a deep breath to steady myself. It seemed almost pointless to do so at this juncture, as my racing heartbeat and shaking hands indicated that I wouldn’t be leaving this stage of adrenaline anytime soon. I grabbed my glasses from my coat pocket and placed them on the tip of my nose, fondly remembering that Brianna had been the one to pick these out for me and my tiring eyes a few years ago.

Frank had died in a car accident ten years after Jamie sent me back through the stones. Ironically, I was on the clock at the local hospital on the same night he was brought into our emergency room. As I left a final check-in with a patient whose surgery had thankfully produced no complications, I heard a soft “Claire” come from Joe, my dear friend and colleague. The fact that he called me by my Christian name and not the playful Lady Jane nickname that he had based solely on my apparently posh accent was the first warning sign. The second stemmed from the tone in which he said my name — the same tone that we, as young doctors, learned to adopt when communicating tragic news to worried loved ones.

“It’s Frank,” Joe continued. “He was brought here after paramedics discovered him at the scene. It was a car accident. He— he was dead on arrival. I’m so, so sorry, Claire.”

I still remember nothing between the moment after Joe broke the news to me and the realization of finding myself sitting in a cold, narrow, echo-filled room with white-tiled walls and a standard linoleum-patterned floor. Sitting next to a body, laid out on a metal stretcher, that once held my first husband’s charm, intelligence, disdain, fatherly instincts, resentment, and grief-filled and eventually unrequited love for me.

As I carefully studied Frank’s face for what I knew would be the last time, I grew paralyzed by a wave of conflicting emotions. A sense of love for him that had undeniably evolved over the past thirteen years, beginning the moment I first traveled through the stones during our second honeymoon in Scotland. It was a love that was no longer romantic, but instead nostalgic and supported by a foundation of likely undeserved gratitude towards him. A deeply-rooted pang of guilt for never completely re-immersing myself in the reality of Claire & Frank — a guilt that stemmed from the belief that, in my inability to irreversibly shut the door on the most powerful thing I had ever experienced, I let both Jamie and Frank down. A heart-shattering realization that Brianna’s tenth birthday would be her last with the man she lovingly knew as her father.

However, the feeling that came the most naturally at that moment was the one I would deny the quickest. A feeling that would stay buried, never to be recognized again. Relief. Frank’s passing released the verbal muzzle he had placed on me when we started our new life together. I had lived a decade without uttering a single word or phrase that could reasonably be traced back to Jamie Fraser. I had tried to apply the same rigor of mental training I developed in medical school to the inevitably futile task of wiping my memory clean of any treasured memories of my life with Jamie. I had remained complicit in the heartbreaking lie regarding Brianna’s parentage. I had fulfilled every requirement of Frank’s cruel conditions, and now I was free.
Seven years after Frank’s passing, I was back in 1764, glancing down at the paper in my hands and skimming the already-memorized words printed by one Alexander Malcolm. A. Malcolm, Jamie’s pseudonym in Edinburgh — a discovery made by Roger Wakefield, a young historian that Brianna and I met during a week in Scotland that changed both of our lives. Shortly after her fifteenth birthday, I took Brianna to Inverness and told her everything about her father. Jamie Fraser. The man who destroyed his own heart for our protection. The proud Highlander who, until a month ago, I believed had died on the battlefields in Culloden.

Brianna and I had carefully rebuilt our collective history over the two years following that fateful trip, a process filled with questions she asked that I never hesitated to answer. We slowly accepted Jamie’s fate as part of our own familial narrative, but the curious Mr. Wakefield never did. He kept researching, kept venturing down promising paths — which is how I found myself, on Christmas Eve in 1965, with unimpeachable proof that Jamie was still alive. He had beaten death in battle and in prison. He was a free man, working as a printer for the main newspaper in town, The Edinburgh Advertiser.

This earth-shattering discovery resulted in a month-long campaign of constant encouragement from Brianna for me to go back and find Jamie. The thought had undeniably crossed my mind the second it registered that Jamie was alive in his own time, but I never seriously considered the possibility of returning to him until my daughter — our daughter — began making the ultimate push. Joe and Gail unconditionally vowed to take care of Brianna, both of them having been let in on the secret of my strange journey back in time (which included a blunt observation from Joe himself: I always knew Brianna had so much of you and so little of Frank).

Brianna never failed to remind me that she would miss me and would carry a hint of sadness through everything that we wouldn’t get to experience together. That bittersweet tinge was constantly present in her voice, even when she would quip about how she was “all grown up” — how she wanted me around, but didn’t need me like she did when she was little. But she always ended each remark with the same conclusion: Jamie gave you to me, now I’m giving you back to him. And you get to tell him everything about me. At the end of January 1966, I made the journey 202 years back in time, carrying nothing but a small and hidden arsenal of modern-day treasures and necessities that I could never leave behind.

She weighed heavily on my mind as I turned onto Carfax Close. Our beautiful daughter, the perfect creation of my and Jamie’s lives. Brianna was the one reassurance that my years with Jamie were real, true, and undoubtedly mine. I brought pictures of her with me, tucked safely in one of my many pockets, and I prayed that Jamie would want to see them. I had no idea what Jamie’s life looked like now, but I hoped that I was still enough for him.

At the heart of Carfax Close, I spotted a wrought iron sign dangling in front of a tall wooden staircase that led to the shop’s entrance. A. Malcolm, Printer, Edinburgh Advertiser. My heartbeat quickly traveled up into my eardrums as I stretched out my hand and gently touched the black letters of the name. Jamie’s name. A. Malcolm. Alexander Malcolm. Removing my hand, I forced myself up the stairwell before the frayed thread of courage keeping my will together had the chance to snap. Once I found myself at the shop entrance, I removed my glasses and nervously patted down my wild curls one more time before shoving open the heavy oak door.

“Christ!” I yelled in frustration as I fought with my incredibly stubborn printing press. I had arrived before dawn to begin my daily routine of printing several hundred copies of advertisements and
essays for The Edinburgh Advertiser. However, the lever to my main press had decided to jam; so I sent Geordie, my assistant, off to find some tools. He had been gone for more than an hour when I finally heard the entrance doorbells chime, and I sighed in much-welcomed relief.

“Is that you, Geordie? Took ye long enough, now get down here if ye would and help me.”

When I heard neither a verbal confirmation nor his usual speedy footsteps approaching, I took a moment to stretch out the temporary hunchback I had developed in my battle with the lever jam. Satisfied with the melody of cracks that traveled down my aching back, I began to kneel down when I heard the words that would irrevocably change my life once again.

“It isn’t Geordie.”

No, I thought. That can’t be her. I’m imaginin’ her voice. I’m goin’ mad.

“It’s me.” A pause. “Claire.”

Oh, Christ.

With my back turned away from the mysterious visitor, I shut my eyes tightly and took a few calming breaths. Keep it together. This is just another one of yer dreams. Ye’ll make it through. Just turn around. Nobody will be there, and ye can get back to reality.

“.....Jamie?”

Real or not, that pleading voice was forever a siren call to me, and I mentally prepared myself for heartbreak as I turned around. What I saw rendered me speechless.

A Dhia, she was so beautiful. Her dark brown curls framed the same delicate glass face that I had fallen in love with almost twenty years ago. The golden eyes that I knew all too well contained the same combination of nervousness and hope that was reflected in her half-smile. We were both frozen at the root, neither of us wanting to budge out of fear that our eyes were truly deceiving us.

Never breaking eye contact with me, Claire — or, at this point, a dangerously real vision of her — slowly descended the stairs and approached me. As she drew closer, I saw the faint lines framing her eyes and mouth, reflecting a life undoubtedly hard-fought. She stopped about five feet away from me, having reached a self-imposed physical barrier, and I quickly realized that I hadn’t said a single word since setting my eyes on her.

Swallowing one more time, as if to physically remove the ball of nerves constricting my voice, the corners of my mouth lifted slightly.

“Sassenach, is it truly you?”

Seemingly rendered speechless herself, Claire’s smile reached its full wattage as she moved closer and covered my left hand with both of hers. Her hands sought the silver-tinted “C” scar she had imprinted on me as a reminder that our life together was real and true and ours. Her watery eyes followed the movements of her thumbs, gently tracing the scar, back and forth. Flinching as though an electric spark had passed between us, any notion in my mind that Claire was merely a vision induced by long days with little sleep immediately shattered.

“You’re real,” I whispered. “God in heaven, you’re real.”

“So are you,” Claire softly uttered in response as she met my eyes, tears escaping her own. “I—I thought you were dead.”
I pulled her hard against me as we collapsed onto each other. We were both shaking, and I couldn’t say how long we sat there on the soot-covered floor, tears of longing spilling down both of our faces. Eighteen years apart couldn’t erase the familiarity and rightness of having Claire in my arms. I found myself silently praying Gaelic pleas as I drew her closer to me — *Lord, thank ye for bringing her back to me. Please dinna let this be for a moment, but instead for forever. I canna live without her.*

“Don’t be afraid,” Claire whispered softly against my chest, likely sensing the irrational fear in my tight grip. Those words harkened me back to our wedding night, the rush of memories culminating in my strange response of a mix between a choke and laugh.

Stroking her cheek, I rested my head on hers, finishing that soothing reassurance I told her all those years ago.

“There’s the two of us now.”
Reconstructing

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your incredible support of this little story of mine. A few canon changes are laid out here, but are important to the story moving forward. Y'all's words of encouragement mean the absolute WORLD to me. You can find me on Tumblr at @lcbeauchampoftarth and on Twitter at @lcbeauchampoft1 if y'all ever want to reach out. Thank you again. <3

The first observation my exhausted brain registered upon jolting awake was the pitch black nature of my environment. The second, and more immediately devastating discovery, occurred as I reached my hand across the bed and encountered cold bed sheets.

Panicked, I fought the urge to crumble into tears. My head remained glued to my pillow and my arm extended, selfishly too afraid to make any move that would either confirm or deny what I believed I had experienced over the past twelve hours. It all felt so real — collapsing into Jamie’s arms; revealing to him that Brian was actually a Brianna who knew Jamie as her father; sharing photos of Brianna with Jamie, his face adding another crinkle and his eyes tearing up with each new photo; the shocking-turned-somewhat-humorous discovery that my still-charmingly naive and gentlemanly husband was a current occupant (but not a customer, he emphasized repeatedly) of the room on the top floor of the highly-visited brothel in Edinburgh, House of Joy; the dinner we enjoyed together, sharing stories from our time apart that floated on the surface of the deep waters we now found ourselves in; the mutual assurances that, yes, we both still wholeheartedly and deeply desired each other; and the unbelievable rush of sensations as we finally came together for the first time in eighteen years.

I had dreamt of Jamie countless times. The plot vaporized every time before my mind could consciously grasp it, but I’d always remember the places I had subconsciously visited with him. The Laird’s bedroom in Lallybroch, the heathered fields we’d traveled through on our journeys, the quaint cottage we’d stayed in the night before he sent me back to Craigh na Dun. I had even dreamt of him in my time, pacing the hallways of my home, whispering calming Gaelic words to a baby Brianna in his arms. These visions of Jamie were far from rare occurrences.

But it was different this time. My dreams usually didn’t provoke any physical side effects, but I currently felt the delightful aches of intense satisfaction. My eyes were weighed down by the puffiness that normally remained after several hours of crying. The bed sheets felt scratchy and unfamiliar, sending my rational thought process into a deeper tailspin. Finding myself in a chilly and dark room, I began resigning myself to the conclusion that my mind had played its greatest trick on me and I was actually still in Boston, emotionally and physically alone.

Ten or so minutes had passed, the air around me thick and silent. Age had given me the upper hand in controlling my emotions, but I never felt more vulnerable than in those moments of instant aftermath, lying in bed and grieving another vanquished dream. The tears I tried to ward off streamed down my cheeks, proving any type of resistance futile.

Suddenly, the door next to my side of the bed slowly creaked open. The top half of my body sprang up as a tall, red-headed, warrior-built Scot slowly tiptoed into the room, balancing a large plate on his
left hand.

"Jamie?" I hesitantly whispered, still fearful that he’d vanish before me upon recognition.

My eyes slowly registered the outline of his body as he hastily jumped at my call, turning to face me.

"Ah! Sassenach, yer awake. ‘Tis my fault. My starvin’ body woke me up, and ye looked too far gone in your dreams for me to feel alrigth about waking ye, so I grabbed some meats and cheese from the kitchen to tide us over ‘til morning. I also got to chattin’ with the cook for God knows how long."

A shiver rippled through Jamie’s body. "Christ, I didna even realize until I was downstairs how cold and dark it is in here, the fire must ha’ petered out while I was gone."

He placed the treasured snacks on the table by the fireplace, clearly pleased with his findings. I, on the other hand, abandoned all sense of propriety as I flew out of bed (naked, as a natural result of our previous activities) and enveloped my arms around his neck, once-terrified sobs wracking my body and overflowing onto his white cotton shirt.

"Sassenach."

"Mo nighean donn? Did ye have a nightmare?"

My vocal chords now overwhelmed by the residual hiccups that tended to accompany the start of a good cry, I sharply nodded against his chest, eventually garnering the strength to answer amidst my hyperventilating breaths. "I—I—I woke up, alone, and you weren’t here—"

"A nighean, I’m so sorry."

"So—so many times, you— felt so real to me. And I—I’d wake up and it would be me, all—alone, and all I’d w—want is to go back to sleep to— see you again."

"Claire."

His gentle yet commanding use of my name—a rare occasion he only entertained in the most serious of moments—calmed my erratic heart as I felt his hand cradle my chin and slowly pull up. Looking into his eyes, I encountered a wave of emotions that perfectly complemented my own palette: his reassurance to soothe my fear; his immediate guilt at accidentally causing my temporary sense of despair; his certainty of reality to counter my doubt of the truth of our surroundings.

"I’m so sorry I left ye all by yerself, mo ghraidh, and in such a strange and unfamiliar setting as well."

I briefly reflected on the fact that this simple and truly earnest apology—one that he, of all people, didn’t owe me—could have applied to the last eighteen years of our lives.

"I’m the one who should be sorry, Jamie," I countered, the steady tone returning to my voice. "All you did was leave to bring us food, and you come back and you’re attacked out of nowhere by a hysterical naked woman—"

Jamie cut me off with a soft kiss. Moving his hand from my chin to the back of my head, he kept it there once we pulled apart.

"I promise ye this, Sassenach. Whatever happens, ye’ll never be alone again."
 Suppressing the rather unattractive sniffles that I was currently battling, I grabbed Jamie’s other hand and kissed each of his roughened knuckles. I couldn’t help but smile at the look of complete adoration on his face — a look that I quickly realized I hadn’t been the recipient of in a long time.

“I’m going to hold you to that, James Fraser.”

Beaming, he met my challenge.

“Ye have my word, Claire Fraser.”

_Claire Fraser._ No other name — Claire Beauchamp, Claire Randall, Doctor Randall — had ever fit me as perfectly as this one. Grabbing his beautiful face, I leaned in and kissed him deeply. I inhaled every inch of him that my senses could gather as his mouth slowly opened, both of us relishing in the joy of living in a time where I could reach out and kiss him at any moment.

Jamie’s arms traveled down my back before firmly grasping my bare arse, and his accompanying moan resulted in a pool of heat gathering in my belly. I silently thanked the heavens that my husband’s favorite body part of mine still brought him pleasure, and my lips left his as I began a trail of kisses down his neck and onto his collarbone. I gripped the bottom of his shirt, and I felt him lift his arms up as I hastily pulled it off and ran my freezing hands against his _incredibly_ well-defined chest.

“What about this time?” Jamie sputtered out amidst his melody of sighs and groans, “I need a bit of sustenance before we start round two, otherwise I might faint on ye.”

His plea sparked a humorous vision that had me stifling a laugh as I kissed him on the cheek once more. I plopped onto the olive green couch that occupied the prime space in front of the fireplace. After restarting the fire, Jamie brought the plate of food to the couch before grabbing the fuzzy grey blanket draped over the foot of the bed. He cozied up next to me as he threw the blanket over us both; he promptly picked up a miniature block of cheese and placed it right in front of my mouth.

“Open up, Sassenach, yer gonna need to build yer strength back up as well.”

Smirking, I accepted his enticing offer. The two of us leaned back against the cushions, Jamie’s right arm drawing me into his side. I curled my feet under the blanket as I placed my head and right hand on his chest.

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A companionable silence fell as we devoured the plate of food, both of us hungrier than we had anticipated. Minutes later, a sigh of deep contentment escaped Jamie’s body, and I peeked my head up to find contentment reflected in his eyes as well.

“Tis a wonderful thing,” he explained, “the fact that touchin’ ye still brings me a sense of peace. It doesn’t matter what else is goin’ on around me, but havin’ ye in my arms always calms my soul.”

Unsure of what to say beyond my simple yet wholehearted response of “ _for me as well_,” I kissed him before returning to my place on his chest.

It wasn’t a thing I had consciously missed, but Jamie’s observation reminded me of the joy of it; that drowsy intimacy in which a man’s body is accessible to you as your own, the strange shapes and textures of it like a sudden extension of your own limbs. Touch had been as crucial to our relationship as the words we communicated to each other, and it would continue to be our safe harbor as we slowly rebuilt our histories that we experienced during our time apart.
Anxious to begin that reconstruction, I laid down the first stone.

“Jamie?”

“Sassenach?”

“What—” I began, simultaneously figuring out what to say and how to phrase it as I continued my question, “what did life look like for you after Culloden? I know that you survived — well, obviously — and you were at Ardsmuir Prison for a time. And now you’re here.”

I felt Jamie’s body temporarily tense under me. He slowly shifted his body so that he was facing me head-on. I adjusted my own positioning to match his, resting on my left side and looking directly into his eyes. He placed his hand around my waist and pulled me slightly closer, then reached for my right hand. The room still too dark and the fire too dim to see the minute details of my hand, his thumb hovered over my palm until he found it — the silver, slightly-raised “J” he had carved into me. Gently rubbing his thumb back and forth over the scar, he began.

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“I told ye about the soldiers taking me back to Lallybroch after Culloden, aye? That Harold Grey had found me and taken me back to Jenny as payment for the debt his brother owed me?”

Nodding, I gave him the signal to continue. Jamie had delicately scratched the surface of the past two decades during our dinner together, giving away vague clues to where he had been and what he had experienced.

“They brought me back to die, and when word spread that I had lived, that’s when the ransackin’ begin. The Redcoats raided Lallybroch constantly, just like ye warned us, Sassenach. It went on for the seven years I was there. To protect Jenny and Ian and their bairns, I lived in a cave on the Lallybroch property. I’d hunt for food for them, and though I had Fergus to keep me company at times, I was alone for most of my time there.”

I couldn’t shake the devastation that threatened to consume my body. My Jamie. All alone for seven years, in a cave. What shocked me almost as much as the information itself was how he said it so matter-of-factly, as if the years of isolation had merely evolved into a new normal for him.

“How—” I swallowed. “How often did you see Jenny, Ian, and the kids?”

“Once or twice a month, at best,” he smiled weakly. “I would sometimes spend an hour or two with them after dropping off my latest hunting finds for them, but never longer than that. I couldn’t bear the thought of puttin’ them in danger.”

I actively sought another question I could ask him, knowing that this mental exercise was my protective shield. If I took any more time to further reflect on what Jamie had revealed to me, I wouldn’t be able to bear it.

“How did you end up at Ardsmuir?”

My husband — Jamie, my husband, sitting right in front of me — and I were complete opposites when it came to our individual ability to mask emotions on our faces. My glass face, as he loved to call it, hid nothing. Jamie, however, could find himself battling an ever-growing pit of rage, yet his face would never show it unless fully provoked.

Nevertheless, my curiosity had slightly cracked his facade, a hint of a frown flickering on his face as he deciphered my question.
“It was the day that Young Ian was born,” Jamie started. “Jenny— she had gone into labor that mornin’, and Ian was—” he paused suddenly, “away, so Fergus was sent to find me so I could keep her company. I held her hand as she gave birth to him, and I was one of the first people to hold him.”

The sapphires in Jamie’s eyes glowed as he recalled the memories of Young Ian’s birth. “He was so tiny, Sassenach. And one of the sweetest things I’d ever seen. I ken I’m only to be his uncle, but I felt a bond between the wee bairn and myself. ‘Tis a feelin’ that is hard to describe, ye ken?”

I nodded in complete agreement, feeling a slight pang in my chest at the thought of Brianna. Her birthday was one of the happiest days of my life, yet it also carried a bittersweet weight, as the one person I desperately wanted there with me had been dead for nearly two hundred years.

Jamie took a deep breath as he gathered his thoughts before continuing. “It was only a few hours after wee Ian had been born that the Redcoats stormed Lallybroch. Withou’ even thinkin’, I took the bairn and hid in a closet with him for what felt like hours. Thankfully, the lad didna make a peep, but I knew that I couldna keep placing Jenny and her family in danger. They were all I had at that point.”

Time seemed to stop as Jamie filled in the years I had missed, the fire gradually warming our chilled bodies. After the Redcoats arrested him, providing Jenny with a reward that would take care of her family during his absence, Jamie was charged with treason and served time at Ardsmuir Prison in northern Scotland. During his sentence, he had befriended the warden of the prison — Lord John Grey, the name I immediately recognized as belonging to the young soldier we had met at Prestonpans. I noticed that Jamie skimmed over most of his time at Ardsmuir, but I didn’t push him on it.

He explained that Ardsmuir Prison had closed during the fourth year of his ten-year sentence and while many of the fellow Jacobites he had known ended up being shipped to the colonies, Lord John gifted Jamie his own conditional release. Jamie was allowed to return to Lallybroch, to be with his family, and to slowly immerse himself back into a normal life. However, in exchange for Lord John’s generosity, Jamie couldn’t leave the property during the remaining term of his sentence. Jamie’s freedom was restrained, yet again, for another six years.

“Sassenach, I couldna tell ye how grateful I was to be at home, especially after spending years in the horrid conditions at Ardsmuir. Jenny and Ian had been the ones to see me through while I grieved over the loss of ye and our child. Ye ken that those two truly care for me, and they were the ones who kept me going. But—”

Jamie paused. In the midst of the comfortable silence between us, I realized — with a faint sense of guilt — that he hadn’t stopped since I asked him that first probing question. He was pouring out years of lived experiences to me, and I knew he must be exhausted. The well of tears forming in his eyes nearly shattered my heart.

“I shoulda been happy at Lallybroch.” His voice wavered, capturing the aftereffects of the emotional rollercoaster he and I had been riding from the moment I walked into the print shop the previous afternoon. “I was surrounded by family who loved me. Young Jamie was 16, Maggie was 14, and I got to see both of them married off. Young Jamie had his second child just last year. Kitty grew from a wee and feisty girl to a brilliant young woman. Michael, Janet, and wee Ian were also still at home by the time I left, and I watched all of them grow up before my eyes.”

“I was happy in a way, but Christ, I missed ye even more than I possibly thought I could during those years.”

He hadn’t said it out loud, but I knew what his heart ached for. I knew, because I had experienced a rising tide of jealousy on behalf of Jamie and me as he told me of the life Ian and Jenny had created.
for themselves. It was foolish and shortsighted to feel that way, as those two had experienced no shortage of troubles — but they had faced them, for the most part, together. They had six children, exactly half of the number Jamie had desired as part of our legacy. They had built a family, and fate had snatched that dream from us.

“I missed you too, Jamie,” I responded, those seemingly hollow words failing to communicate the bone-deep ache I carried from the moment I said goodbye to him. “So much.”

“I was so selfish at times, Sassenach,” he confessed. “I’d see Ian and Jenny fawn over their bairns, play games with them, fight with them to get them to eat their vegetables, sing them to sleep if they woke up from a bad dream. And sometimes, I’d think - why them, and not us as well? What had you and I done for life to rip us apart?”

“Nothing, Jamie.” I urged him on, resisting my own impulse to crumble into tears alongside him. “We were on a path we had no control over. We did the best we could.”

“I woulda given anything to spend just a day rocking a fussy Brianna back to sleep or to stare at her for hours with you. There were some days where the loneliness was all-consuming, where I almost woulda preferred prison.”

I placed a mental pin on this point in his timeline, knowing that I wanted to know more about this struggle he experienced back at Lallybroch. I asked another question in hopes of helping us both jump over this emotional hurdle.

“What made you decide to move to Edinburgh?”

Jamie wavered again, and I mentally kicked myself for thinking that this inquiry would have lifted his mood. I could see him battling what to say next — though his face continued to show nothing, he had other tells that I had picked up as the person who physically, emotionally, and mentally knew him better than anyone else. His fingers tapping, the corners of his eyes twitching, his breathing rapidly departing from the regular pace he set — he had something he needed to tell me, but really didn’t want to say it.

“Hey,” I whispered, pulling Jamie’s hand into my lap. “It’s okay. We’re taking this a step at a time.”

Exhaling quickly, he responded, “I’m sorry, Sassenach. There are pieces I’m no’ yet ready to talk about. Things I’m still processin’.”

Naturally jumping to the worst conclusion possible, I froze.

“Oh God, please don’t tell me you fell in love with somebody else.

Deciding not to push against his hesitancy, I squeezed his hand, encouraging him to continue whenever he was ready.

Jamie proceeded to tell me that he had settled down in Edinburgh about six months ago, quickly befriending a local printer who was responsible for the advertisements and essays that went into each copy of The Edinburgh Advertiser. The man had taken Jamie under his wing, and it was not even three months later when he offered Jamie the reins to his shop. Alexander Malcolm had been a pseudonym he’d picked out as an extra safeguard, but most people around town knew him as Jamie Fraser, a freedom he’d long been denied of and now truly enjoyed.

“Considerin’ the Advertiser was the only paper willin’ to print advertisements for House of Joy, we struck a deal with Madame Jeanne and that’s how I got this room. It’s close to the shop, provides me with food and a room and a bed, as well as my own privacy.”
Though I attempted a smile to indicate my attentiveness, I was guilty of merely half-listening to this most recent change in his life, preoccupied with what he had said right before.

*What was he processing? What really brought him here? Was there another reason he needed privacy?*

“Sassenach? Ye’re upset, I see it all over yer face. What’s wrong, *a nighean*?”

Caught. Eighteen years apart, and he could still read any emotion that crossed my face. With anybody else, I would have brushed it aside as an accidental reflection on a surgery that had gone wrong, or on a petty spat with a frustrating co-worker. But from the moment I met Jamie, he unknowingly had broken down the walls I built around my heart, the first bricks laid the day that my parents died. I couldn’t hide this fear from him — he made me more honest. So, I took the plunge, terrified of what awaited me at the bottom.

“I know that you had a life. We both did. Lives that took us away from each other and established new ties. I just— Jamie, it’s alright if you did,” *stuttering, knowing that I couldn’t lie to myself either*, “but did you ever fall in love with anyone else? Was there anyone else?”

“No .”

He spoke it like a promise. An oath. A commitment.

Jamie’s hands were now framing both sides of my face, his serious eyes piercing my own.

“Sassenach, I willna lie to ye and say that I havena sought comfort in the years ye were gone. Those moments came when I was at my lowest, most brutal version of myself. But, *mo nighean donn*, I have never loved anyone but you. Only you, now and forever.”

Tears of relief spilling down my cheeks, I poured my gratitude into him as our lips met. One kiss grew into two, three, five — losing count, I pulled myself closer to him. Skin against skin, Jamie’s breeks served as the sole barrier.

“Jamie,” I muttered in between passionate kisses as my hands pulled on the ties to his breeks, “take these off.”

He gently lifted me up as he used his other hand to pull them down, his lips never leaving mine. My legs automatically wrapped around his waist as he stood up, carrying both of our emotionally worn bodies back to bed.

We collapsed onto the mattress, our kisses slowing but never fully stopping. Our physical weariness surrendered to our mutual need to remind one another that I was his, and he was mine.

Jamie turned to me, and I to him, and we made love to each other in a slow, unspeaking, and long-lost tenderness that left us lying still at last.

Breathless and sweaty, we fell asleep entwined, exhausted by the early stages of unpeeling the layers of masks Jamie and I had donned in our separate lives. The last thing I remembered before falling asleep was Jamie wrapping his arms around my waist and pressing himself against my back, thankful for the guarantee that when I woke up the next morning, he would be by my side.

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