While not a cross-over in the strict sense of the meaning, I have appropriated several plot devices from both the current show about immortals, Forever, and another earlier show about an immortal, New Amsterdam (which starred Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) that I actually preferred the back-story for, and pulled them into a purely Outlander character-scape. The Outlander references are a mix of the books and the TV series, so don't jump down my throat on date differences!

Simply put, Jamie Fraser is immortal, and his path is about to cross once again with Claire, and Brianna, the daughter he has never had the chance to meet. Picking up where Dragonfly in Amber left off, what happens if Claire can't go back, but Jamie never dies?
Prologue

Outlander Forever

Prologue

I’d seen him before, twice, but I thought it was just a trick of the light, a reflection of what I wanted to see. We were each on our own train, separated by the teardrop-shaped platform of Government Center. His broad smile merely one of thousands that I had seen from behind the semi-clean windows of a Greenline trolley. The first time had been his birthday, two months ago. I had taken the B train to make my way to Brianna. She was moving out of the dorms into her own apartment, and until the congregation of roommates returned in the Fall, I was to be staying with her.

She was nearly on her own, but I was clinging to these months, holding on, perhaps, too tightly. It was hard to believe she would be twenty-one soon. Wasn’t it only yesterday I ran headlong into the cleft of the stone at Craigh-na-Dun? Perhaps if I had gone at a more measured pace. But, no. Jamie’s touch was still fresh on me, and redcoats were at my heals. I could not allow them to stop me. I could not put Jamie at risk by letting them stop me from going back.

As strange a place as I had spent the previous three years, where I landed was no less foreign. I had expected things to change – much could happen in three years, but it was clear very quickly that I had not returned to my own time. Jamie had thought he was sending me back to Frank, back to a life, a man I had known, and loved. Perhaps, in truth, I could no longer think of Frank as my husband. My only thoughts, as I felt torn apart by the noise and vibration of the stones, were for Jamie. Jamie, and the child he was sending me away to protect.

~~~~~
I stepped off the train. My eyes snapped shut as the squeal of metal hit a shrill high note when the train made the sharp curve and pulled away. As many times as I heard it, it always plucked at my nerves. I looked across the platform. I looked into every window of the train sitting there. I knew it couldn’t be him. All else aside, it had been two and a half centuries. As timeless as I thought our love was, there were limits. But hadn’t I traveled two hundred some years into the past?

I tightened my jaw as the next train pulled in, and dropped my gaze to my feet. I had to laugh. How fashion had changed! I could still picture Jamie in his kilt – the jaunty way it moved when he walked, the chug of the fabric behind him, or the alluring glimpses of his knees as he approached. The little flats I was wearing barely kept my skin from blistering against the pavement, and underground was no cooler. In my years with Jaime, I would have been thought to be out in my undergarments for the way I was dressed, but by today’s standards I was overdressed! At least my leggings didn’t need to be tied at the thighs, and I wasn’t passing out because my corset was too tight. But there were days I missed it all.

I was lost to my reverie when I noticed the large boat shoes pointed toward my feet. I casually drew my gaze upward, smiling as I noticed the very nice calves, and swallowing hard as the knees looked familiar. Red Bermuda shorts, belted at the waist, and a nice white cotton shirt traced a toned torso. I got as far as the collar, but could not bring myself to look any higher. Corset or no, I felt like passing out. I managed a deep breath.

“Will ye no look me in the eye? Or has the devil’s own courage left ye?”

My head shot up and my mouth dropped open.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ.”

“So it is you, Sassenach.”

Even if I hadn’t seen it, I would have heard his smile.

The warm tones of his voice sent chills through my body. I pinched myself and gritted my teeth. I was awake. I tentatively reached a hand toward him and he plucked it from the air just before I cupped his chin. Our hands interlocked. His thumb stroked my palm then placed it over his heart, holding it there with his rather much larger hand. My eyes had traveled with the movements of our hands, and I now stared at his hand pressing my hand to his heart. It pounded against my palm nearly as hard as the pounding in my own chest.

I was struck with the only word I could fathom.

“How?” we said in unison.

I felt the vibration through my hand as he chuckled. His free hand slid between my shoulder blades and drew me closer, his lips touching my ear as he spoke.

“All in time, Sassenach, do ye live close?”
He felt the nod of my head.

~~~

We were on the next train that would take us close to the apartment Brianna had let and that I was sharing. I normally got off at the first above ground stop after Kenmore Square and walked the remainder of the way. It was a bit of a trek, and the thought of being alone with Jamie was just too strong. One stop early I sprang to my feet and towed Jamie to the sidewalk. He had to hold me back from walking into the side of the train before it could pull away. We crossed the remaining lanes of traffic and thundered up the front steps. I turned at the foot of the stairs and he pressed me against the newel post.

We were both shaking slightly. I had twenty years of repression passion, but Jamie had more than ten times that amount. I opened my mouth to speak, not knowing what I could say, but he subtly shook his head. Words were too civilized for what we were feeling.

The ground floor tenant walked by us as he left his apartment.

“All afternoon, Dr. Fraser.”

I smiled and nodded as he passed. Jamie’s right eyebrow quirked and he smiled broadly. He pushed me harder against the post, his body speaking for him. I was still his, in name, in soul, and if we could manage the four flights without being too badly winded, soon once again in body.

I don’t remember climbing the stairs. I think Jamie may have carried me the last part of the way for I remember the feeling of my feet reconnecting with the floor. The dark of the hallway was replaced by the brilliance of the common room in the apartment. The walls were white, the floors pale wood, and at this time of day a blinding light came in the windows making the room glow like an illuminated page. I turned to watch him as he closed the door and stepped into full light. He heard me suck in a breath and he tilted his head. A slight shake of my head relieved him of serious worry, but even after two and a half centuries, he could read me like a book of transparencies. He was beautiful. He didn’t look a day older than when I had left him – in fact I’m not sure I had ever seen him looking so young. I felt a shiver and rubbed my hands over my upper arms, self-consciously taking stock of my body, and feeling down-right cougar-ish.

I averted my eyes, mentally grasping for what to say or do next. I glimpsed the back of the couch a few steps behind me, extending my hands back until I reached it, guiding myself to the solidness of its support. He watched this slow retreat with guarded fascination. When I finally looked up again, his eyes were boring into me, and there I was, espaliered along the back of a large floral sofa, no means of escape.

A hum of pleasure in his throat broke the silence. I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks as he scanned my body, but I could not move or speak right then. He stepped right up, looming over me, until he bent his neck sharply, and without touching any other part of me, placed the softest kiss on my lips. My hands clutched and sank into the padding of the couch as I stretched my neck up to keep his lips on mine for as long as I could. I guess that was encouragement enough. His hands gripped my shoulders and he gave me a very thorough kissing.

Breathless, and inches from each other, it would have been simple to cast our inhibitions to the wind and let loose our passions, but we were both quite aware we could kill each other with our desire. To survive this reunion would require a controlled release, lest we explode.

I smiled and Jamie took a step back. An odd nervousness caused us to laugh and I bit my lower lip to keep from saying anything ridiculous.
“Ye kept my name,” he stated calmly.

“I did.”

“So, there’s been no one?”

“No one that mattered.”

My hand finally came loose of the sofa and I stroked his cheek, fingertips tracing down until I outlined his lips. He kissed each finger. For a moment I thought he was going to cry, but he swallowed it down.

“I need you, Claire.”

“And I want you,” I replied, looking into his eyes until I shut them to enjoy the kiss I engulfed him in. His arms came around my back, pulling me from the support of the sofa and completely off my feet. My shoes fell off in a pair of soft rubberized thumps. When Jamie put me back on my feet, I curled my hands around both of his and began backing my way to my bedroom.

I hadn’t made my bed this morning, and there it sat, open and inviting. We each looked at the bed and then back to each other. I couldn’t help but think of our wedding night. I saw the smirk curl up one side of Jamie’s face. He slipped off the boat shoes and padded to the foot of the bed.

“I ken verra well what to do this time; ye taught me well.”

“You were a quick study,” I said in all truth. And he was. The first time may have been awkward, but by the end of our first night together he was well on his way to being an amazing lover. I remembered very well how it could be with Jamie, and hoped we could find even a fraction of what we once had.

I grabbed the hem of my sleeveless tunic and inverted it as I removed it and left it on the floor as I advanced upon the bed from the side. He looked approvingly at the view of me in leggings and sports bra, and I was encouraged. I was half-way out of the bra when he decided to assist me, and I became aware that the removal of spandex was best performed as a solo event – at least as far as bras were concerned. Had anyone walked in at that moment they would have been convinced we were engaged in some sort of bondage ritual, bound together at the wrists, and struggling like we were trapped in a Chinese finger puzzle – the more we pulled the more trapped we became.

“Hold still,” I told him, and without him pulling against me I was able to disengage my wrists and then free him as well. He was staring at my breasts with a sheepish grin. He grasped me by the waist and I took in and released a long breath.

“Shall I try the tights myself, or will you risk hanging the pair of us?” I asked in jest. His fingers were on the waistband in an instant. Apparently I was worth the risk!

Once getting the fabric down to my knees, I collapsed against the edge of the bed so he could pull my lower legs free. He was nearly back to the wall when the tights finally relented sending him sprawling into the chair across from the bed. He balled them up and threw them down in frustration as he stood again.

“Christ, Sassenach, it was easier to get you out of your corsets than this.”

I laughed, and heard him begin that wonderful rumbling chest laugh. The sound stopped abruptly, though, as he saw me leaned on the bed, elbows behind me, legs akimbo, wearing just the thinnest little underwear. He mumbled something, I believe it was in Gaelic, and being out of practice I
couldn’t say precisely what he’d said, but I could gather the meaning. I rose to my knees on the mattress and reached for his belt, which appeared to be the only thing keeping his shorts from slipping off his hips. I was glad to see that even after two plus centuries some things never changed. As his shorts dropped, the tails of his shirt unfurled halfway down his thighs and I smiled at the sight. The fabric was more refined, and the cut a little closer to his shape, but the shirt was not all that different from the one I had him remove on our wedding night so I could look at him for the first time.

I began unbuttoning him from the top, but he took my hands and pushed me back up the bed as he stepped flush with the end of the mattress. He made each button an occasion, stopping to grin at me with each one he slipped free.

“This is damned torture” I said, “and you know it.”

“Oh, aye,” He nodded.

“Now, where was I?” he purred, defiantly re-buttoning the last one he had undone. I rolled my eyes.

“You bloody, bloody man.”

“Well, Sassenach, it’s already been two hundred and fifty years, what difference will a few minutes make?”

I flipped onto my stomach and sprawled toward the foot of the bed and set up on my elbows.

“I know I once told you to go slow, but timing is everything, and a window of opportunity is running out.”

“Do ye want me, or no?”

“Oh, I want you well enough, but you keep me waiting much longer and I’m gonna think it’s all a dream and pull the blankets over my head.”

The shirt disappeared in a heartbeat, and somehow it took my underwear with it.

~~~~~

He landed with a bit of a plowing motion, scooping me up and placing me on my knees as he knelt as well. Our thighs pressed their full lengths as we struggled to retain balance on the soft mattress. It became an awkward dance as we wobbled to and fro, our expressions a mix of humor and concentration as we attempted to stay upright. It was like two opposing forces in a rowboat, if either of us went too far without the other taking the other tack, we’d both topple.

I let out a “whoop!” as our luck ran out. Jamie over-corrected and went over like a redwood, taking me down atop him. As our breathing calmed, a wall of nervousness started to come between us. I was seated, straddled, over his thighs, my hands locked together between my own legs, as if that provided cover. Jamie covered my hands with one of his own and I looked down as the warmth sank in. I turned one of my hands over and lifted and caressed his hand in amazement.

“Jamie…your hand. How did they fix your hand?”

He smiled nervously and gave my hand a little squeeze.

“I’ll tell you everything, but not just now.”
His hand went to my cheek and slid to hold my jaw. The animal glint I saw in his eyes sent my insides doing summersaults. His first kiss was gentle, but each one became more possessive. That need for ownership was not one sided and every muscle in every limb began to fight for supremacy. As much as I wanted to dominate him, the urge to surrender, to let him take control, was impossible to ignore. While Jamie was very much a sensitive man, there was a primal energy that had attracted me to him from the very start. He sensed my acquiescence and quickly subdued me, pinning my body beneath his. He could tell by my body language that surrender was imminent, and that I would not challenge his mastery.

Jamie was hitting every possible erogenous zone as his hands and mouth explored me. It had been some time since I’d had a thorough going-over, and my synapses were overloading. He hadn’t been expecting an unconditional surrender. This wasn’t the first time I’d thought myself to an orgasm using Jamie to get me there, but, damn, he was actually here this time!

“Oh, God,” I moaned.

“Can you wait for me next time?” a terse voice inquired. “I barely got a hand on ye.”

“Sorry. I’m outta practice,” I said jokingly.

“Well…good,” he laughed back. “I’d hate to think…”

“You may not want to finish that thought if you want a next time.”

“I’d hate to think I’d lost my touch was what I was about to say.”

“Oh, no, you’ve definitely NOT lost your touch.”

“Good to know.”

I moaned again and relaxed under him. It may have been a good thing that I couldn’t wait for him. My nerves were gone, my body was limber, and I felt a molten heat growing to accept him. I slid my hands down and groped his bottom, and he reciprocated with a laugh.

“Ready, are we?”

I could tell he was ready, and as he pushed one thigh then the other of mine wide apart, I knew I was too.

We both drew a deep breath as our bodies joined. It was foreign and familiar at the same time. As he moved, he unlocked the doors of memory, and I cried as I regained thoughts I had pushed aside for the sake of my sanity. We moved together in undulating pleasure until my body gripped him tight. He pushed up on his arms and I saw the trails of his tears running down his cheeks as a pulse of heat made me close my eyes. There were several aftershocks that served to ameliorate our pleasure as we came down from the fierce need that had overtaken us.

We moaned questioningly at each other for some time, each hum answered by one slightly shorter, quieter, and more dreamy in quality than the one before it. Moving was out of the question other than lips finding each other briefly, reassuring each other we were real. I fell asleep with his warm body half on top of mine, one hand tangled in my hair, the other cupped between my legs. I hadn’t felt this level of contentment in years, and I hadn’t slept this peacefully since the day before Culloden, the last time Jamie had exhausted me with his passion. If it was a dream, I wanted to stay in it…forever.
Jamie was absently twirling a length of my hair around his index finger and smoothing it against his thumb. I don’t think he was aware he was doing it. It woke me enough to make me turn toward him. His tresses showed their myriad of gold and red tones against the stark white of sheets and pillowcases. He was wearing his hair short, but it still framed his face in a flattering fashion. I nestled my chin against Jamie’s chest and felt his arm come around my back and his hand curve against my hip. I had so many questions, but for the moment I was content to languish in his arms, feel the heat of his skin, and listen to his heart beating.

~~~~~

My hands must have wandered as I slept, for the next thing I remember Jamie was laughing in my ear.

“I’m no sure what you’re doing, but I don’t mean to stop you.”

“Hmm?” I inquired as I came awake. I sat up and looked down at him lying in my bed. I couldn’t explain what I was feeling even to myself. I took his hand again and traced the lines of his fingers – all perfectly straight, no scars, no twisting, no frozen joints. I kissed the back of it where the nail scar had been. I kept my lips pressed against it and my eyes filled with tears. He was whole, in a way that I never thought he could be, even in my dreams. I don’t know how long he’d been watching me, but he stroked the tears off my cheeks with his other hand and sat up enough to kiss me.

“How?” I asked shaking my head at the improbability of it all. How could he still be alive? How does he still look like a man in his mid-twenties? How could his hand be intact? What about his other injuries?

I pulled him to a sitting position and wedged myself behind him. His back was a clean slate. No silver slashes of healed multiple floggings -not a mark to be seen. I ran my hands from shoulders to waist. Oh, God, it was a nice back. I never thought to know it in this form.

“So beautiful,” I cried, laying my ear to the space between his shoulder blades. He reached back and pulled my arms around his chest, crossing my hands and holding them in place. I wrapped my legs around his waist and sobbed as I clung to him. He bowed his head and let me cry, kissing my hands now and then to let me know he was there. I know it wasn’t just about his hand or his back, and he knew it too. There was so much we had to tell each other.

~~~~~

As my breathing normalized, Jamie uncurled my legs from around him. He moved my arms up over his shoulders and pulled me up his back like a sack of potatoes. My feet dangled loose as he got up on his knees. He fell to his stomach with a little grunt as I landed on him. He stretched out width-wise on my bed, half on the sheet, half on the folded back blanket. His toes just extended beyond the edge of the mattress, and the tips of his elbows touched the other edge as he propped his head on the bend of one. His entire back was on view. He was putting himself on display for me, letting me revel in the un-marred symmetry. And revel I did. With my palms flat, I smoothed them over the surface of his back. I tried to hold it in, but the ecstasy of touching his back like this, seeing it so broad and clear beneath my hands, elicited sounds from me even Jamie had never heard. He lifted his head and looked over his shoulder at me. I pushed his head back down and kissed the base of his neck.

I kissed my way down the center of his back, sighing, massaging the sides. What started in him as sounds of relief as I soothed his muscles were quickly becoming the moans of a man who was on the edge of a greater need. I rolled off to my back beside him, and he lifted himself just enough to
pull me beneath him. I couldn’t resist filling my hands with his thick hair and burrowing right
down to his scalp. His eyes widened at my touch and I pulled him in for a kiss. I held his head,
trying direct where and how fierce the contact of our lips would be, but he was quickly away from
my lips, nibbling at my neck, mouthing my breasts.

Each time my back arched I inched closer to the edge of the mattress. Everything above my gluteus
muscles was cantilevered out in mid-air. Just Jamie’s weight and the hold of his arms kept me from
tumbling to the floor. I pulled my knees up to plant my feet as steadying out-riggers, but Jamie
thought it an invitation. I was startled at first and let out a surprised cry. His hands tightened on my
hips and I felt secure. We were still relearning each other’s bodies, but I knew he wouldn’t drop
me. I wrapped my hands around his arms and held on, sighing as he shifted my hips up to meet him
time and time again.

He had pulled me further onto the mattress and I was on the verge of calling out for Jamie, God, or
whoever when the door opened, and Brianna, wide-eyed and shocked, walked in and her mouth fell
open.

“What the - ? MOTHER!”

My head fell back, the only way it could, and I saw an upside-down image of Brianna, face turning
red, blue eyes blazing with anger and embarrassment. I brought my head forward and looked into
the same eyes, though they were Jamie’s this time.

“Mother?” he questioned, then looked at the source of our interruption.

Brianna met his eyes, silently saying, “who the hell are you?”

“Bree,” I breathlessly said. I looked at her, highly embarrassed, and parentally guilt-filled. I wanted
to explain, but Jamie had been unable to stop himself at this stage of our interactions, and I could
feel my expression changing to one of sexual satisfaction and contentment.

“Oh,” I let out as a breath.

Brianna looked mortified and backed out of the room, shocked stiffness in her limbs.

I slowly brought my head down to look at Jamie’s face again. He was smiling broadly, his breath
coming quickly.

“She’s mine?” he asked.

“You did look at the girl,” I said with a growing smirk.

“Aye, she’s mine - ours.”

Jamie arched his back and drove hard into me, repeatedly. We had much we had to tell each other.

~~~

Jamie was letting out contented heavy breaths and pulled me all the way back on the bed where I
was clinging to his side. His hand encompassed my shoulder, and his fingers absently stroked at my
skin.

“Ought you go after her?” Jamie asked, staring up at nothing.

I puffed a light laugh.
“She’s got your temper.”

“Oh,” he said, smirking. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, so he did both. The joy in his eyes brought a lump to my throat, and the tears streaming down his face tore my heart out. His hand curled around my belly, and his thumb stroked back and forth.

“I wish I could have seen you, round and plump, or with her at ye’re breast. Was she – was it, a, hard birth?”

“The birth was the easy part, keeping her in there until she was ready nearly killed me, and her. But I’d be damned if I was going to lose her.”

I started to choke up and swallowed over and over trying not to break into sobs. He gathered me in and rubbed his face on mine, reassuring me with Gaelic endearments. The words hit me like a paralytic, and I went limp.

“Was she big, as a baby, I mean?” Jamie asked once I seemed able to talk again.

“She was so small – almost a month early, but so determined. The moment I saw her eyes, and the profusion of auburn fluff on her head, I knew. I knew she would make it – she had your spark of life. And I swear she let out a battle cry the first time they put her in my arms… I’ve got pictures – thousands of them. They aren’t here, though. They’re in storage.”

Jamie sat up, alert as could be. He pulled me into his lap and wrapped his arms tightly around me and I leaned my head back against his shoulder. I could feel his heart hammering.

“Oh, Claire,” he said breathily. “I wondered so many times – had ye made it, if our child had survived – boy or girl.” He lowered his voice, and spoke right into my ear on those words. “Years went by. Once, I got totally pissed, charged right up to stone, pressed my hands to it and yelled, ‘let me go to Claire or end me here!’…the next morning I woke clinging to the bank below the mill pond again! But when I’d lived long enough to meet you on the other side of the stones, and there was no sign of ye, I feared something had gone wrong, that ye’d never made it back. I was heartsick. I went to the stones every year I could, hoping to hear stories of your return, a rumor or anything. There was no sign of you.”

I slipped my hand into his and he folded his hand around mine. I swallowed and thought of how to begin.

“The only way I can explain it is that I over-shot. I don’t know why or how, all I can think is that, I hit the stone too fast or hard, or that I was so bathed in adrenaline that it somehow affected how far I traveled. Or that you were the only thing on my mind, and I was never meant to return to Frank.”

He squeezed me a little tighter at the mention of his name and I looked up sideways at him. His expression was odd.

“Tell me,” I said flatly.

He made that Scottish noise I had tried so hard to emulate and never got quite right.

“I met your Frank,” he began.

I turned in his arms, and stared open-mouthed.

“When you didn’t show up the year you told me, I tracked him down. I asked him about your disappearance. I said I’d heard rumors about the stones,” he said, bending toward me and smiling
wickedly. “What did he say?” “At first, not a thing. He wouldn’t even admit you were missing. He said all I’d heard about Craigh na Dun was fantasy, and that his wife had been kidnapped or run off. But then his eyes narrowed, and he came at me pointing an accusatory finger in my face. ‘It was you’, he said, all angry like. ‘You were the Highlander was watchin’ my wife!’ Well, I backed away, but he kept a-coming. I didna know what he was about, but ‘twas clear he knew nothing of your whereabouts at the time.’

The look on my face must have been unabashed delight, for Jamie gave me a hungry look.

“Do you know what he was talkin’ about?” he asked as he grinned.

“I do, in fact. The night before I ’fell through time’ on my way to you, Frank thought he saw a ghost. A man in full highland garb, standing below my window, watching me- you wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“Well, it was before we actually met, could be my ghost was out lookin’ for ye, to fetch ye to me. Perhaps that’s why I fell for you at first sight - I’d chosen ye for myself.”

That thought made my heart flutter. We sat quiet for a bit, just our hands rolling over in a Mobius strip of motion.

“I did see Frank one time, after I was back. It was his one hundred and fourth birthday, as it would happen. Which meant he was a damn-sight older than he ever let on to me!”

“You like your men immortal, lucky for me.”

We smiled at each other, but I blushed quite red. One of my husbands lived over a hundred years, and the other was still going strong at over two hundred and fifty!

“I’d tracked him to an assisted living facility in Glasgow. Apparently sometime after he’d given up on me he married a local woman, with three daughters. He’d always wanted children… anyway, I’d arrived and asked after him, and the nurse at the desk said, ‘Ooh, but you’ll be here for the party, then!’”

Jamie laughed at my attempt at the Glaswegian accent and I gave him a poke in the ribs. He grabbed my hand and kissed it. He nodded for me to continue, still holding my hand.

“I dared not contradict her – I recognized a nurse in authority when I saw one. I slipped into the back of the room. Three women sat around him, all with grey hair – his daughters I assumed. I tried to remain inconspicuous, but I was the only one under the age of sixty. I was comforted by the way his daughters looked at him. They loved him. I felt a little guilty, but it seemed he had had a good life, after me.”

Jamie gave me a squeeze on the knee. “I thought he either didn’t see me or didn’t know me anymore. He hadn’t said a word all night. I volunteered to get him back to his room, I figured I owed him that much. I’d gotten him settled and tucked up, and kissed him on the forehead. I stood to leave, and he grabbed my wrist. I tried to pull away, but despite his age, he had a grip of steel. I looked into his eyes, and the recognition was clear. He knew me, he knew who I was, and he spoke. ‘Claire, where have you been?’ he said. It wasn’t angry, just a simple question, one I’m sure he’d wanted to ask for a long time. So I told him. Everything. Craigh na Dun, meeting you, Black Jack Randall – the reason you’d married me, and why I had ‘agreed’ to it. I even told him I’d chosen to stay with you, that there was something so compelling about you that I couldn’t leave you. I told him about the days leading up to Culloden, and about Brianna, and how you’d loved us enough to make us go, and live. I spoke about over-shooting our time, and that I was coming back
to him, but fate intervened. I confessed that a part of me was glad not to have…put him through the pain of raising a child who could not help reminding me of a man I could not have.”

I dropped myself sideways into Jamie’s lap and buried my face against his chest. He slid his chin over the top of my head and held me still.

“Do you think he believed you?”

“I don’t know. I went to see him again a few days later, and he was dead. The man lives one hundred and four years, and drops dead two days after I visit him!”

“Hardly your fault, Sassenach.”

“Perhaps.”

“Something you’ve left out?” he asked, feeling the tension rise in my shoulders.

“His final words…the nurse told me, just before he died, he said, ‘the highlander’, that was it. We freakin’ killed him. Between the two of us…”

“Too many M&M’s in his snack could have shocked the life outta him at a hundred and four! You said it yourself, he had a good life after you. Maybe he was just holding on to know the truth. You may have given his soul the peace it needed.”

I nodded below his chin and released a deep breath. God it felt good to be held.

~~~~~

Jamie sucked in deeply through his nose and pursed his lips.

“Do ye smell something, Sassenach?”

I sniffed too and frowned.

“Defcon brownie.”

“Hmm?”

“Brianna made brownies.”

“There is clearly significance to what you’re saying, but I canna ken.”

“She went straight to chocolate —“

“Oh, I see now. What is it with chocolate and women? Ye turn to it like a religion.”

“Be thankful we have it, for it solves many ills.” I could see him pondering, but words were not forthcoming. He looked apprehensive.

“When she’s had a good dose, I’ll go talk to her.”

Jamie sighed and began to rub my back up and down. There had always been something about his touch. I sighed, then, and began reviewing some of what he’d said in my mind.

“What did you mean about waking up in the mill pond again?”

“Oh, well, that’s how it happened the first few times, when I came back from the dead. One
minute everything was black and peaceful, next I know I come out from under the water, and the waterwheel’s turnin’, and there I am, naked as the day I was born. And that first time was in April, and all. Now that was a chill.”

“Wha – wait, what is this?” I pulled my left knee in tight and turned in his lap until I was sitting cross-legged between his knees. He could see I had questions, but that I had no clue how to ask them. It was my turn to listen to his story, and believe the unbelievable.

“It was a shock, the first time to be sure, for you know I meant to die at Culloden – and I did, too – for a moment. Randall and I traded mortal wounds. I felt the darkness overtake me. I was drifting, like I was floating up out of my body, but next I knew my head bobbed to the surface just below the mill at Lallybroch. I figured I must be a ghost, sent home to see everyone one last time – or that I was to be haunting the place now. I stayed clear of everyone at first. I figured they had enough to deal with, what with my death and everything.”

I lowered my gaze, then brought my head up and looked deep into Jamie’s eyes. I offered a slight smile.

“So, when did you realize you weren’t dead after all?”

Jamie reflexively rubbed the back of his head and smirked.

“When Jenny knocked me out cold with the laundry fork!”

I laughed loudly and turned my back to Jamie’s chest, pressing against him as I continued to spasm with mirth. I heard the wooden legs of a kitchen chair scritch across the floor in the distance and I sobered quickly. Brianna had heard the sound of me laughing, to be sure.

“You alright?” Jamie kindly asked.

“I have to go talk to her. Can we bookmark this conversation for later?” Jamie nodded, broad smile extending all the way to his eyes.

“Would you like me to come with ye?”

“No just yet.”

I disengaged from his arms and scooted to the edge of the bed. I lunged forward to retrieve my tunic and tossed it over my head as I stood up. I looked over my shoulder at Jamie. I felt a bit embarrassed looking at him naked in my bed. We had been happily reminiscing, unconscious to the fact that we were not wearing a thing. I blushed and took in a nervous breath, trying not to look at him, but it had been so long, and I was giddy at the thought of his reappearance in my life. He leveled his eyes at me and stared, lifting a hand to press up under his chin. I rolled my lips into my mouth and pressed them tight.

“The sooner you talk to her, the sooner I get to meet my daughter, and I verra much would like that.”

I fought tears and left the room.

~~~~~

There was a three by three inch piece of brownie missing from the nine by twelve inch baking pan. I picked a corner off one of the neighboring brownies and nibbled on it. It was very good. A chair was pushed back from the table, and the gallon of milk was still out of the fridge. Brianna had
retreated quickly after hearing my laugh, taking milk and brownie to her refuge.

“Not gonna make it easy, are you?” I said under my breath.

I slung the milk back onto its shelf in the fridge and looked down the hall. I walked slowly to the other end of the apartment. I had chosen the room as far from Brianna’s as possible to give her a bit of space. Now I stood outside her door, heart in my throat, poised to knock.

Two quick taps and I turned the knob. Brianna was sitting in her chair by the window, feet planted well up the wall, taking what little breeze was blowing in.

“Bree – “

“Please tell me you at least know the man, and didn’t just pick him up on campus on the way home.”

Her voice was calm, on the surface, but I found myself growing angry quickly at her words.

“Of course I know him!”

“Well, there’s that then.”

Her tone was beyond judgmental. She sat up and glared at me.

“Will you allow me to explain?” I asked, sitting on the foot of her bed and pressing my hands to my knees.

“We’ve had that talk.”

“That’s not what I mean - he – Jamie – “

“I don’t want to know his name…How could you? He’s barely older than I am! People are gonna think you stole my boyfriend!!”

“He’s not that young!” I indignantly retorted. “You have a boyfriend?”

“No!”

“Brianna – “

She stormed out of the room, and a few moments later, I heard her angrily roar, “Let me go…I said let me go, dammit!”

My feet reverberated on the flooring as I sped toward the confrontation. I saw Brianna struggling against Jamie’s hold on her elbows. They had each leveraged their strength, and were each other’s balance.

“Jamie!” I called to him. He ignored me, eyes solidly fixed on the daughter who didn’t know him.

“Brianna,” I said switching to look at her. She was snarling, hair flailing, twisting against Jamie’s grasp. I could think of only one thing that would end her struggle.

“Bree, he’s your father!!”

She let go and they both fell backward onto the floor, landing hard on their backsides. Jamie had, thankfully, put his shorts back on. I made a move toward Brianna and she scrambled back,
recoiling from my approach. I was hurt by her rejection, but I understood the bomb I had just dropped on her.

“He can’t be – he’s too young. Besides, you said he was dead,” she accused.

I turned to Jamie, shaking my head.

“I never told her that,” I swore to him. When I looked back, Brianna had retreated to her room once more, and my legs collapsed beneath me.

~~~~~

I woke to the feel of Jamie’s hand on my shoulder and a bag of frozen French fries pressed to the back of my neck. I rolled to my back and looked up at him.

“Not the happy reunion you were expecting?” I said dryly. He stroked his index finger along my right eyebrow a few times, smiling down at me. He shifted the bag behind my neck and I felt a dart of cold.

“What?” I questioned, groping behind my head. I extracted the make-shift ice pack, holding it up so I could read it. “Oh, no, you better put this back in the freezer – it’s organic, and very expensive – and Brianna’s.”

“You need it just now; it will last a bit longer.”

He put it back under my neck and ran it back and forth. I sighed with relief.

After a deafening few minutes of silence, I had to speak, had to make it clear to Jamie.

“I swear to you, I never told her you were dead. I never would because…I couldn’t bring myself to believe it. You were just...beyond reach.

Everything went dark as Jamie blocked the light and gave me a kiss.

“I know, Claire. You couldn’t lie to save your soul, let alone save her feelings.”

Jamie took the bag of rapidly dripping fries and clamped it to his own neck until it had left most of his back damp, then propelled the bag in a high arc over the couch where it landed with a thud in the sink of the galley-like kitchen.

I slowly sat, Jamie at my back, his hands, still icy from the fries, stroking my lower arms. My mind was everywhere and nowhere. I hadn’t prepared Brianna for any of this -not that she would have believed me anyway. She was a very practical girl, very grounded. Time travel and eternal love were not in her vocabulary. I might be able to talk her around where the love was concerned, but she would never believe her mother had lived for a time in the 1740’s, and that that was where she had been conceived.

Jamie stood and slowly pulled me up. I was a bit unsteady, so he put an arm under my legs and conveyed me to the island counter, sitting me there like a small child with a skinned knee. It was more like a skinned soul I was suffering from.

“Looks like you could use a dram,” he counseled, and went to looking in cupboards.

“I can’t say as I disagree, but you won’t find anything stronger than vanilla extract behind those doors.”
He turned and stared like it was an absurd notion. I found myself apologizing for the lack of alcohol.

“Brianna’s not of age to drink, and I only brought my barest essentials for the summer here.”

“And nowhere among your bare essentials was there room for even a flask of whiskey, woman?” he said, stalking back to where he had deposited me.

“And don’t get me started about there being an ‘age’ where you suddenly become auld enough to drink! The way they do it now just makes the young people go mad with it once they can have ‘strong’ drink.”

He grabbed the counter on either side of my thighs and leaned right into my face. “And do ye know what it’s like to be ‘carded’ for nearly fifty years, Sassenach? And then when you prove to be old enough to have the drink, to have the barman tell you, ‘this stuff here is older than you are, sonny, sure you can handle it?’”

He wheeled away from me and threw himself upon the couch, feet landing over the armrest. He threw his hands up to his temples.

“Christ, and they call this ‘progress’."

He hadn’t really raised his voice during the tirade, but his frustration was clear, if misplaced. I slid off the counter, and stood until I was sure of my balance. I came around the couch and lifted his head and shoulders enough to lay him back on my knees.

“Oh, Jamie Fraser, you complicate me.”

His mouth twisted and he raised an eyebrow.

“Aye? Oh, Aye,” he laughed the second time. I had hoped enough of pop culture had rubbed off on him to get my reference, but it was true – never had my life been more in turmoil than when I was sharing it with Jamie, and never had I been happier.

“You complicate me too, Sassenach, always have.”

There was a long pause in our conversation as I held my forehead to his and we just breathed.

He sat and took my hands in his.

“Why, Jamie?”

“I saw her leaving, and I got a feeling I’d never see her again if she walked out that door…I know it makes things harder for you, but I’m not prepared to lose either of you again anytime soon.”

We gravitated toward each other, my head leaning on his shoulder. The sadness in his eyes reminded me of the forlorn look he had had just after he slipped his mother’s pearls over my head. How our wedding day just keeps coming back! He might as well have reached into his chest and handed me his heart. I didn’t know how deeply he felt for me then, and, sadly, the feelings weren’t mutual, but I responded to him, none-the-less. I was about to kiss him when he abruptly stood and moved behind the couch.
“I should give you some time alone with her. I’ll go.”

He was halfway to my room before my brain could grasp what was happening.

“Wait – what?”

I ran after him and found him slipping into his shirt and righting his shoes to put them on. I closed the door and locked it this time.

“You are not going anywhere!”

I caught him by the arms and looked up. His mask was incomplete, his feelings sitting on the surface. In his mind’s eye he had already thrown me down on the bed. His hands grabbed the small of my back. He had unbuckled his belt to tuck in his shirttails, and with little more than a nudge his shorts were well on their way down.

“I’m not prepared to lose you again either,” I whispered, lowering him into the chair. I knelt over him, my tunic pushing up around my hips. A desperate need drove him to action. I guided him slowly and delighted in the way he incited my body. I needed him to displace my thoughts, and with each slow move of our bodies on each other, sensation replaced words and pure pleasure and sense memory surmounted all else.

~~~~~
Jamie thought he was a ghost, but he was cold none-the-less. Damp April mornings were never warm, but he woke this morning shivering uncontrollably. The apron of Jenny’s he’d swiped from the clothes line did little to help the situation, but it was all he’d been able to make off with. Today was laundry day, though, and there was sure to be something on the line he could wrap himself in. He watched in sadness as the women prepared the cauldron to boil the clothes and linens, Jenny the Major General barking out orders. He was going to miss fighting with her. Nothing had prepared him better to be a soldier than a lifetime of defending himself against her superior intellect and reflexes.

He watched as windows were thrown open and blankets and mattresses were carted into the yard. Jenny took Spring cleaning seriously. All the better for him, Jamie thought, planning how to make a quilt into a make-shift kilt.

Being dead was strange. Jamie was surprised he still had such an appetite after dying, and that he needed sleep as much as when he’d been alive. But he was still in transition, and sure it would pass sooner or later.

Jamie made his way stealthily to the cold house for a bit of milk. He’d have preferred a nip of whiskey, but as a ghost, and a thieving one at that, he procured what he could for himself. Laundry was an all-day event, so Jamie found a deep pile of bracken surrounded by thick over growth, and settled in.

“Ye best stay out of ye’re mam’s way, Wee Jamie,” he heard Ian say. “The way things have been going missing this week past, she’s in no mood to be trifled with.”

Jamie smiled and he unconsciously turned to where Claire should have been, by his side. The joy sank out of him. She was gone from him, but at least she was alive if all had gone well. He drew his knees up to his chest and tried to pool whatever heat was still in his body.

He heard random bits of conversations in passing, mostly the daily doings and local gossip, but his sister’s voice was exceptionally shrill today.

“Ye nearly made ev’ry dress I own into cinders, so I’ll be wielding the laundry fork, if ye don’t mind, and even if ye do!”

Jamie heard a girl sob, followed by a boy’s voice, with a decidedly French lilt to it.

“Non, it is not about the washing, it is about Milord. She’s heard not a word, and is in a state of worry. Come, now, dry your eyes.”

Fergus – Jamie worried about him, but knew Jenny would take him in as her own. He was a wild thing, still.

The yard grew quiet as the afternoon wore on. Jamie decided now was the time to see about getting
something to wear before the modicum of daytime heat ebbed away. With no one about, he took a well beaten blanket off one of the lines and tossed it over his shoulder. Just as he turned to sneak off to one of the barns for the night, he felt the impact behind his head, and heard a sickening ‘thunk’ before all went dark.

~~~

Jamie woke to dim candlelight, a soft bed, and a warm room.

“What were ye thinkin’, ye clot-heid?” Jenny’s voice greeted him. “We’ve been waiting for word of you, and you spend a week skulking around, stealing my apron and most t’other bits that have gone missin’ I will bet.”

“You mean I’m not a ghost?” Jamie asked.

“And why would ye think that?” Jenny asked, sitting next to her brother’s knees.

“Well, I died at Culloden.”

“If ye’d have died at Culloden, ye did a half-arsed job of it.”

“So you had in mind to finish the job?” he asked feeling the goose-egg bump on the back of his head.

“How was I to know it was you? – is it bad, the pain?”

“That depends – if I’m dead, it hurts more than it should.”

“And since you’re livin’?”

“Well, then, the pain’s not all that bad a trade-off.”

Jenny took her brother’s hand, showing an odd level of concern for him.

“What made ye think ye’d died?”

Jamie looked away, leaned his head back on the pillows and settled his eyes on the beams over his head.

“I woke in the mill pond, having been on the moor just moments before.”

Jamie snuck a look at her expression.

“Or ye just don’t remember anything between – which is more likely!”

“It may have been easier if I had died, for it’s no safe for me to live anywhere.”

~~~

Boston, July, 2015

“Stay with me tonight,”

I whispered, my lips almost touching his.

“I shouldn’t.”
“Who says?”

“Claire, the lass wilna trust ye if I’m still here in the morning.”

I sighed, knowing he was right, and pressing my forehead to his. He tightened his grip on me.

“I havna gotten my fill of you; I wilna disappear. I have a whole list of things I want to do with ye, some of them even out of bed! I can wait, but not the lass.”

“Just stay ‘til dark, then? I’d like to hold you, feel your skin against mine – settle in your arms for a while, so I can imagine you’ve stayed the night.”

Only his eyelids moved, but it was an agreement, no doubt.

I swept my tunic off over my head as he lifted me from himself and the chair and took the three uncoordinated steps necessary to reach the bed. We just fell back, the mattress rebounding more than I expected, bouncing Jamie on top of me yet again.

“Well, your body certainly thinks it’s twenty-three again,” I whispered, pulling his mouth to mine, as I slipped his shirt back off his shoulders.

“God, I wish this room was sound-proof,” I mumbled, arching my back and jubilantly welcoming his manifestation inside me.

Jamie responded by placing his hand over my mouth, shushing me, and making sure I would remember the feel of his skin against mine. It had only been one afternoon, but I had just had more sex than in the previous ten years, and I wondered, at this age, if one could become a nymphomaniac – please? OH PLEASE!

~~~~~

I was half asleep when I walked Jamie to the door around ten. He kissed me softly and handed me something I saw him scribble down as he was getting dressed.

“Meet me at Faneuil Hall, tomorrow, three-thirty, for a late lunch. If you’re still hashing it out with the lass, call me, the number’s on here.”

He grabbed my chin and kissed me again. “Thank God I’ve found ye, Sassenach. I don’t know how much longer I could have stood myself without you.”

~~~~~
Brianna had been a habitual early riser since I moved in with her this summer, so I made sure to be up before she could make her escape. I had gotten way more sleep than I anticipated. Despite my attempts to get Jamie to stay the night, he held firm, knowing that if he was still stashed in my bedroom, I would be thinking about him and not have my mind on what I needed to say to Brianna. I handed her a cup of coffee as she came into the kitchen, and lifted my cup from the counter to take a sip.

“Mornin’, sweetie.”

“Is HE here?”

I looked down into my coffee.

“No, he left last night.”

I felt tingling below the pit of my stomach. Just thinking of him brought his touch to life. I did my best to redirect my thoughts.

“Good,” she sourly answered.

“Bree, I know it’s all a shock – “

“A shock? I walk in on you in flagrante, and then you tell me that that child humping you is - he’s my father? And I’m supposed to what? Welcome him with open arms and say ‘Daddy I missed you’?”

I exhaled heavily and sat at the table.

“No, nothing of the sort, but he is your father.”

I rolled the mug back and forth in my palms, the handle touching the back of each hand in turn, then grabbed it firmly and gulped a large, throat burning amount.

“How? How the hell is that man-child my father?”

“Granted he looks young – “

Brianna snorted and rolled her eyes.

“He looks young,” I reiterated, “And he was…is younger than I am, but I can assure you, he is much older than he looks.”

I had seen that look before from Brianna. She was determined to draw first blood, make me think twice about being in the same room with her, let alone trying to talk to her. It was that look that had stopped my attempts to tell her about her father when she was younger. She always looked so injured when I spoke of him.

“Why now? I don’t need him now – I needed him then, and so did you!”
Brianna’s eyes had turned into a Scottish day – not quite pouring, but by no means dry.

“You don’t think I heard you cry all those nights? I’d ask you about my father, and you’d tell me these wonderful tales, assure me he was a great man, and then you’d go to your room, and cry so hard it made my ribs ache. If he was so all-fired perfect, where the hell was he when you were going through hell? It hurt me too much to listen to you, so I stopped asking about him, and in my mind, he was dead. Why couldn’t he just stay that way?”

“Oh, Bree!” I was flattened, crushed by her steamroller of anguish. The only weapon I had was the truth.

“I cried because I thought I’d never see him again. I cried because you would never know him.”

The tears were coming down my face now, dripping into my coffee.

“I cried, because no matter how hard I tried to think of my life without him... I would see certain expressions on your face, or the way you would stand when you were tackling a decision, and suddenly, he would be standing beside me, and, dammit Brianna, I got over the pain a long time ago, but you don’t recover from true love.”

My hand began to shake and I dropped my coffee, the mug shattering and the Rorschach test with cream and sugar covering the floor, settling, disturbingly, into a pattern that looked all too much like the stones of Craigh na Dun.

“Bloody hell,” I exclaimed.

This was going to test every fiber of my being.

~~~~~

I followed Brianna from room to room as she prepped for the day, trying to talk to her all the while. Sometimes getting in her way was the only way to slow her down long enough to attempt to make her understand difficult situations. Smart as she is, pure intellect does not always lead to understanding, and that inborn stubbornness doesn’t help. She was not going to get away until we came to some kind of understanding about Jamie.

“If you will just listen, Bree, please don’t do this – there is so much you don’t know!”

She bulled past me with her clothes piled over her arm and bolted from her room to the bathroom. She closed and locked the door, but one skill she didn’t know I had came in quite handy. With the dexterity of a surgeon – which I had been for many years now, I dissected the lock mechanism and let myself in. When Brianna pulled back the shower curtain, she found me perched on the toilet lid, feet pulled up so my chin rested on my up-bent knees.

“Ok, I surrender,” she ruefully scowled.

“Get dressed first,” I suggested, although looking at my used attire I realized I had little authority on that front.

We met on neutral ground – one of the unused bedrooms, thankfully left furnished so we needn’t sit on the floor. The décor was tacky, but it somehow added to the neutrality, as neither one of us felt comfortable among gingham and lace. Brianna chose her spot well – a Papa-san chair that had been adorned with peacock tails fanned along the high back. She clamped her hands to the rests, tilted her head, and fixed her eyes on me. For a moment, I was standing in front of Colum MacKenzie, his steely gaze giving nothing away as I attempted to explain my presence on his
lands. Brianna’s face returned as I came back to today, and I sat on a rolled-edge little oddity that reminded me of something that would have sat in Jamie’s cousin Jared’s house – but clearly a reproduction.

“I know you have a lot to take in,” I began, “And I know what I’m about to say only adds to what you must deal with, but, I still love him.”

I looked into Brianna’s eyes, but could not read a single emotion on her face – something clearly inherited from the father who had unceremoniously popped up in her life. This was all going to fall to me – Brianna had no intention of meeting me halfway.

“So, to the beginning?” I rhetorically asked. “Right. I’m just trying to figure out what beginning, and just how crazy I want you to think I am just now. OK, the beginning – the day I met Jamie, the first time…He was injured. The well-meaning members of his travelling party were about to break his arm in an attempt to fix his shoulder until I interceded. I plucked the proverbial thorn from his paw, or rather put his paw back into joint. Over the next few days, I had occasion to render aid several more times. He later told me he was already falling for me by then, but I was in no place to open my heart, though there was a pull between us.”

I looked at my daughter. She sat stone-faced.

“God, you look so much like him. I had almost forgotten just how much. Brianna, I’m not going to tell you every detail of our relationship, at least not now, but know this – Jamie Fraser is the best thing that ever happened to me. I have you because of him. Forces beyond our control brought us together, and forces beyond our control kept us apart until now.”

I rose from my seat and walked, half bent, to kneel at her feet.

“He is everything I told you he was when you were little. If you knew what we went through together, you might begin to understand. I know you won’t believe half of what I’m about to tell you, but if you promise not to have me committed, I will tell you how I came to love Jamie Fraser, and why no matter how long it took for him to find me again, I still love him.”

There must have been something in my tone, because Brianna slipped off her chair, and crossed her legs Indian style, taking my hands into hers as she did.

“Tell me about my father,” she said, sounding very much like the little girl who used to ask.

“I didn’t want to fall in love with him,” I began. “I thought I had all I wanted, including the man I thought I was going to spend my entire life with. But I found myself in a dangerous place, alone, unable to protect myself, with all I had to offer being what I knew of medicine at the time – I wasn’t really a doctor, yet. But that knowledge, in and of itself, also put me in danger. When you perform what others see as a miracle, that kind of awe, it creates fear. I knew things, and to some people that meant I was a danger to them – one that had to be dealt with. It was because of a person like that that I ended up married to Jamie. He was willing to risk his life to keep me safe, and the only way he could keep me out of the hands that wished me harm was for our marriage to be officially, um…er, consummated.”

I looked away. I knew my face was as red as when Brianna had walked in on Jamie lying on top of me.

“It was only twenty years ago. Scotland wasn’t that backward,” Brianna said, defenses engaging.

I looked down and laced my two hands together, not quite praying for her understanding, but
“Jamie and I were married in the late fall of 1743.”

“I said it matter-of-fact, no smile, no hint of humor, and unblinking while looking directly into Brianna’s eyes. Her mouth dropped open.

“But…”

“Believe me, I still have trouble believing it, and I was there.”

“How old are you?” Brianna pointedly questioned.

“Biologically, on my next birthday I will be turning fifty years old, but I was born in 1918. In 1945, I was transported through time, landing in 1743. In 1746, Jamie sent me back so I could be safe, so I could have you. I should have returned to 1948, but something went wrong, and I came back in 1995 instead.”

“No…no it…NO.”

If she’d had the space to unfurl her legs, she’d have been gone, but as it was, she was trapped by my presence, and right now I was glad of it.

“Bree, I know how it sounds, believe me I do. Jamie gave me that exact look when I finally told him the first time.”

“When you finally told him? How damn long did that take you? And what institutions did you both escape from?”

“…”

“What scares me the most, is that you believe what you just told me,” Brianna told me after three hours of laying my heart on the line and telling her selected events of my life with Jamie.

To her it was a fairytale - a very detailed fairytale full of sexual tension, lusty highlanders, and unnecessary roughness – but a story, a concoction of my addled, sex starved brain.

But the story was out there, and now I had to provide corroborating evidence.

“I told you you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Time travel? Really mom, can’t you just admit you found a hot young guy and wanted to take him to bed?”

“I know you’re skeptical. You can’t quantify what I’ve told you. There is no equation – well maybe there is, but no one has thought to try. It’s a test of…faith.” The word felt heavy on my tongue.

“OK, mom, whatever. Just lock the door next time. I don’t need to see it.”

“Is there no way I can make you believe?”

“Give me his full name. I’m gonna do a criminal background check.”

“His full name?”
“You got a problem with that?”

“No, but you better write this down…his full name is James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser. Make sure you read what he did at Culloden. Your father is a man to be proud of.”

I stood and stiffly limped out of the room. After my entanglements with Jamie, and sitting on that floor for hours, I could barely walk. If nothing else, Brianna had pretty much given me the go-ahead to keep seeing Jamie, as long she didn’t have to see anything – it was an understanding – of sorts. Nothing I could say to her was going to change her mind right now, so there was no point in continuing the conversation.

Just before I went through the door, I looked over my shoulder and said, “If you have any questions, I’ll answer the best I can.”

“They let you cut up people for a living?” was Brianna’s parting shot.

It felt like a knife in my back.

~~~~~
“Remanded to Your Safekeeping”

My talk with Brianna over, for now, I took a quick shower. I found myself carefully considering my wardrobe for my ‘lunch’ with Jamie. I actually wasn’t sure if eating was in the offing, and after the reunion we’d shared yesterday, it wasn’t likely to stay that way even if it started that way. I opted for three easily removed pieces, just in case.

I felt like I was enveloped in electricity as I took the green line back to Government Center. I tapped my way down the endless short steps that dropped me to street level, and crossed the road into the tourist mecca. If a group from out of state was getting dropped off in Boston, there was a good bet Faneuil Hall was on the itinerary. This being a summer Saturday, it seemed half of New England and a good portion of the Mid-Atlantic States had just exited a motor coach, and were headed toward me.

I looked from side to side, hoping to catch a glimpse of red hair. I could no longer count on Jamie towering over the rest of the crowd. Tall men were much more common, as were gingers, if today’s crowd was an indicator. I scanned back and forth, turning completely around.

“Ye’ve overlooked me four times now, Sassenach, should I be worrit?”

I turned and smiled up at him as he swept me up in his arms. Part of me wanted to cry with the relief of holding him again. He felt my body relax in his embrace.

“The lass gave ye a tough time?” he surmised, then held me back to see my expression.

“She doesn’t believe a word of it.”

“Well, of course not, what sane person would? I’ve met verra few people who could comprehend. Speaking of which, come, there’s someone I’d have you meet.”

He took me by the hand and led me to a corralled table sitting outside one of the eateries. There was an older gentleman sitting, holding a tall glass that still held a good sized gulp of beer. The table had plates scattered about, crumbs and crusts, and the spare sprig of parsley all that remained of their lunch.

“Would you like a bite, Sassenach?” Jamie asked as he seated me in front of one of the empty plates. His companion stood in deference to me.

“Claire, let me introduce you to an ‘old’ friend of mine,” he began.

Jamie and I met eyes briefly, but I looked at this man as he took my hand and kissed the back in greeting.

“My, my, his descriptions do not do you justice.”

Jamie took my hand back from this man and pulled me close against his hip, standing over me protectively.

“That’s enough of that, Griff…Claire, this is Griff. I’ll be ‘house-sitting’ for him for the next year
or so, or maybe we will, if ye like?” Jamie’s excited expression made me smile in return. “Seems Griff, here, has gotten himself a speaking engagement on a round the world cruise – better him than me, right Sassenach?”

I smiled again and lowered my head deferentially, feeling unaccustomedly shy. Jamie looked shocked.

“You behave, Griff. I’m off to fetch Claire a bite, and you best both be here when I return.”

I sat defensively across the table from Griff. I don’t know why, but I felt uncomfortable with the man, despite the friendly manner in which Jamie treated him.

“Jamie’s told me quite a lot about you, but despite the glowing tones and rapturous descriptions, he fell short in describing your beauty.”

I ignored his comment except to smile.

“So, you’re ‘old’ friends?” I asked, a bit sharply.

Griff straightened in his seat and leaned back, clearly taking stock of me. He picked a pair of horn-rimmed glasses off the table and set them at the end of his nose.

“Old enough,” he finally replied. “Jamie’s been telling me about finding you again, Claire. Seems to me if you wanted to be found, or he was really trying, he could have tracked you down years ago.”

He was clearly trying to get under my skin in order to induce me to divulge something, but I refused to rise to the bait.

“I moved several times, and I went back to school. You can hardly fault him for not looking at college housing.”

“Quite,” Griff replied. “A learned woman, then? What field of study?”

“I am a doctor – a surgeon, actually, and I have been told my tongue is as sharp as my scalpel,” I informed, crossing my arms and leaning them on the edge of the table, my fingers well extended.

Griff’s face came to life, taking the glasses off before they shook loose with his laughing.

“I see why Jamie never gave up on you.”

I blushed and looked down again. There was something about this man. I couldn’t shake the feeling I knew him somehow. I didn’t know precisely how old he was, but unless he was younger than I thought, he was well preserved. His hair was only mildly greying, and the warm medium brown was full of luscious waves. His eyes were wide and inquisitive, like a Samoyed husky Brianna had wanted when she was young, and I’m sure this man was just as much of a handful! Any attempt at conversation had become a staring contest by the time Jamie returned.

Jamie properly diagnosed the situation upon his return. He looked at the two of us and shook his head.

“I guess I’m lucky you two aren’t circlin’ each other and growlin’.”

He stood smiling down at the pair of us. “I trust each of you with my life – have done so many times over. You,” he addressed at me, “you doona know what he knows of me, so you canna trust
him, and you,” he addressed to Griff, “ye know too much of what I’ve gone through to find her, and don’t trust women in general. I’ll no put up with this for long. Griff, ye’ve kept me sane, held my secrets and protected my belongings these last few times. Claire has been holdin’ my heart since the day we met, and has held my soul since the day we wed, so I’ll thank you to know her more than twenty minutes before passin’ judgment on her character. And Claire…I swear, the two of you will find trust if not friendship in short order.”

Jamie sat now, and handed me the plate and glass he’d come back with.

“I hope ye like chicken sandwiches and grape soda, oh” he added, reaching into the left leg pocket of his cargo shorts, “and I got ye a bag of sour cream and onion chips to go with it.”

The food sat in front of me as my stomach gurgled unhappily, but I felt so chastised that I couldn’t bring myself to eat. Griff seemed similarly subdued. I saw him reach across the table and take my hand again. Griff delicately held the tips of my fingers from beneath.

“Dear lady, shall we start over? Anyone Jamie has such trust in, is surely deserving.”

I lowered my head and pursed my lips. “Jamie just found me yesterday, so please forgive me for not wanting to share him so soon. It may also come down to jealousy on my part. For I am sure you shared parts of Jamie’s life that I am still in the dark about.”

Jamie shook his head at both of us and smiled.

~~~~~

We rode back to Park Street and transferred to the red line train that would take us to within a short walk of Griff’s house. I strolled arm in arm with Jamie, Griff walking a few paces ahead of us. It was a nice, tree-lined street. The houses were all well-appointed, and had the look of age if not the actual age to go with it. We turned onto a cobbled walk, a steep staircase ahead. Jamie turned me toward him, gave me a kiss, and said, “I need a quick word with Griff. Will ye wait at the foot of the steps ‘til I signal ye up?”

I nodded and flashed a slight smile. Jamie took a couple of trotting strides and was at Griff’s side as they ascended. I couldn’t hear their words, but I couldn’t help feeling the conversation had something to do with me, and the idea of me living here with Jamie in Griff’s absence.

I watched as Jamie climbed the stairs. His shorts clung nicely to his form, and on each step up accentuated his rear end. I scanned down to his feet, noticing the brown hiking boots—the kind that always seem to come with the bright red laces—and saw the tops of the little white socks peeking out. My hands both clenched.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jamie motion me to catch up. I couldn’t resist squeezing his bottom with both hands as I reached him. He turned sharply, but his stern look shifted when he saw the look on my face and the pink of my cheeks I could feel.

“Couldn’t resist,” my voice professed.

Jamie slid his arm around my back and kept my hands in check as he escorted me the rest of the way up and into Griff’s home.

“Keep that in mind for later, Sassenach,” he hummed in my ear. “I want ye so bad I can barely walk.”

~~~~~
The ground floor and lower level had all we’d need to live in more than comfort. An upper level and attic were deemed off limits, and would see us far from any inner sanctum Griff might have set aside for his secrets. The indoor/outdoor kitchen would be a godsend as there was no air conditioning in the building, but it had been built at a time when there were transom windows between all the rooms, and a wonderful airflow kept it from becoming stifling or stale.

The kitchen would have done Leoch proud – all the modern amenities, but also a large hearth that could have easily handled the catering of a feast all on its own. It opened onto a bluestone patio that seemed to sink into the surrounding gardens, a view of the Charles River in the distance, if one knew precisely where to look.

We walked by what must have been the old kitchen when we headed down stairs. Most of the rooms down here were bunker-like – dark, with minimal window spaces (perhaps even the remnants of an earlier construction that was now almost completely below grade), which made it perfect for the media room Griff lead us into.

“Feel free to watch anything in my video library,” Griff offered. “It’s quite varied – sure to be something neither of you have taken a gander at before.”

The back of the L-shaped sofa sat level with the floor of the entry hall, a ramp running down the near side to access the seating. A chez lounge sat like a curved spine angled along the ramp. A large screen was embedded in the facing wall, assorted electronics, similarly ensconced, sat below. A three tiered pastry tray sat laden with the remote controls to the machines, and one remote the size of a traditional VHS tape sat on the polished cherry wood of the coffee table. I rolled my eyes. How the hell would we look at anything without earning a degree in remote technology?

Tucked in neatly along the back of the entry hall was a wall of bookshelves, floor to ceiling, with a ladder to access the upper shelves. I leaned against the ladder and rested my rear on the wrung that afforded me a seat. Jamie was happily taking in the opulence of his friend’s home, and equally delighting in the selection of books.

“The library wraps around into the next room,” Griff was saying as he drew Jamie through the doorway. I hopped down to follow before they got too far ahead of me. I saw Jamie take note of a particular book, and a smiled spread across his entire face. “Bummer of a birthmark, Hal, Aye?” Jamie chuckled, heartily slapping Griff across the back. They both laughed, but I shrugged and shook my head.

“Do ye have the whole Far Side collection, then?” Jamie queried.

“No only that, they’re all first editions!” Griff stipulated, returning the hearty hand clamp across Jamie’s back.

Jamie almost lost his footing he was laughing so hard. He was clinging to the library ladder on this side of the wall, his knees buckling intermittently.

“I don’t understand – what’s so funny about first editions?” I asked, totally bewildered by their reactions as I leaned back against the edge of the pool table that seemed to define the border between library and game room. My question merely triggered a new round of serious laughter, and Jamie finally succumbed and slid to the floor, hugging his knees and stomping his feet as he rocked back and forth.

“Dear lady,” Griff said, turning to me, “the books in question contain…cartoons.”

“Cartoons?”
Bemused, he continued, “It is a collection of comic strips. Jamie and I used to exchange copies of our favorites from the daily paper. I’m not sure they would…suit your sense of humor. They aren’t to everyone’s taste.”

“Oh, come on, Griff, Claire has a wonderful sense of humor,” Jamie responded, still bubbling with laughter. “Claire…Claire – come look at this one -come on,” he commanded, waving me over to where he was polishing the floor with his back.

Jamie pulled me down into his lap, his look half laughter, half impending desire. He split open the soft-cover compendium, pushed it up into my hands and pointed me to a picture of a deer with a bulls-eye pattern on its chest, the writing below saying, as Jamie did a few minutes ago, “bummer of a birthmark, Hal.” I shook my head at the absurdity of the image, but laughed anyway. I leafed a few pages ahead, finding myself unable to control my laughter at the parade of images with which I was confronted.

“Oh, my God. Brianna had a shirt with this one on it – Roger MacKenzie sent it to her as a birthday present when she was little. She loved it…well, I guess humor is genetic!”

The joy in Jamie must have been transmuting into lust as he held me in his lap. He smiled lasciviously at me, and leaned on his hip, dragging me down to the floor beside him. His hand traced my naked knee and I tugged at the hem of my skirt, trying to elongate it and stop his wandering hand before it travelled into too private a zone.

“Jamie,” I whispered in embarrassment, trying to keep my admonition below Griff’s hearing. It was very difficult to turn Jamie off once he’d been turned on, but I suppose I started things when I couldn’t keep my hands to myself on the stairs.

“I’ll leave you two alone, should I?” Griff questioned with a raised brow. Jamie was still laughing, but I was attempting to get to my feet before Jamie took Griff up on his offer. There was a pleasant warmth emanating from Griff’s smile that I couldn’t help but reciprocate. He proffered a hand to get me to my feet, and held it while he spoke.

“You have no idea how it warms my heart to see Jamie genuinely happy.”

My throat clogged up. I wanted to hug him just then. There must have been others, over the years, whom Jamie had turned to, had told much or all of his story to, who had protected him from accusations of witchcraft or worse, but right now, Griff and I were likely the only two other people on the planet who knew, and believed. I nodded instead and gripped Griff’s hands in reply.

~~~~~
Every time I thought the tour was concluding, we’d turn another corner, and there would be yet another room. My eyes had almost glazed over, as had my ears as Jamie and Griff seemed to be able to endlessly converse on the most inane of topics. As we entered the umpteenth room, I spotted a nice sturdy looking chair and made a break for it. It had been a long day, but my exhaustion was more mental than physical, thinking about my morning confrontation with Brianna. I had been trying all day not to let her barbs leave scars, but I was feeling the hurt – I was feeling her hurt.

I saw a sad smile on Jamie’s face from across the room as he looked at me, but then he nodded at something Griff said, and his attention was drawn back into their conversation. Jamie slipped something into the right leg pocket of his cargoes, and nodded open-mouthed, his shoulders tightening. Griff’s voice was low but I could hear him say, “She needs to know,” as he placed a hand on Jamie’s forearm.

“I havna had the time yet,” I heard in reply. “Just me being alive was a bit of a shock…and our most immediate thoughts, well…it had been a fair long wait since I’d had my hands full of her.” Griff nodded slowly.

I felt warm as I thought of Jamie’s hands touching me for the first time in twenty years – it had been amazing – life affirming – and that way of phrasing it – having his hands full of me! Jamie must have felt the desire emanating from me even from across the room like seismic waves. At least a six on the Richter scale, should I guess. His eyes locked on mine, drawing him to me. He crouched next to my chair and put his hands on either side of my waist.

“What is it?” he solicited.

I shook my head and smiled. “Not here,” I cooed, touching his cheek with a curled finger.

A distant sound of a door closing turned Griff around and brought a momentary twitch of a smile to his lips.

“You’ll stay to dinner?” he rhetorically asked just before he disappeared from the room.

We could hear voices far off, one Griff’s, the other belonging to an unknown female.

“A wife?” I asked Jamie.

“Nearly, but nothing so official.”

“Jamie,” I whispered, warmth creeping up my cheeks.

“Can ye make it through dinner, or do I need to make our apologies?”

I smiled at his insight.

“Give me a kiss, and get me a cold drink, and I’ll hold on.”
A light dinner sat waiting for us as Griff walked us back to the modern kitchen. That was when we met the person attached to the voice we had only heard at a distance. She was a tall, striking woman, shoulder length ebony hair dancing about her face. Griff put an arm around her back and stopped her from setting the table.

“My friends, Jamie, Claire…this is Sidney.”

He looked adoringly at her.

“I hired her as my personal assistant six years ago, and it became…more personal about two years ago.”

She smiled and I think I detected a slight blush rising on her cheeks. Her deeply bronze colored skin hid whether she was outright embarrassed.

The four of us sat around the table, nibbling at the fare, and at first saying little, but Jamie still had the gift of drawing information out of people in casual conversation.

“I didna know for several years that Griff’s assistant ‘Sid’ wasna an old white-haired man. All he’d say was ‘Sid will take care of it’.”

I saw a look come up on Sidney’s face.

“Well, I didn’t know that I wasn’t an old white-haired man for the way he treated me at first! Never met a stiffer bastard,” she said, turning to tease Griff.

We all laughed, but it was tinged with deeper emotions.

“I still don’t know your last name, Sid,” Jamie related.

“I don’t know yours either, Griff,” I added.

Across the table, Griff took my hand and shook it as he introduced himself.

“Madame, I am Griffith Rhys – Jones, at your service.”

At the same moment Sidney was responding to Jamie’s query.

“Sidney Murray, glad to finally meet you in person.”

Our mutual introductions over-lapped some, causing a bit of mis-hearing, but when Jamie shot out of his seat the rest of us fell silent.

“Murray? My sis – ancestor was married to a Murray.” Jamie retook his seat, but still looked overjoyed. “Do ye know your family lines? Maybe we could work out if we’re related.”

Sidney looked a bit taken aback, but she nodded. Less than an hour later, Jamie had found their common ancestor – his sister’s youngest child – Ian. I’d never had the chance to meet half of Jenny’s children, and while Jamie enjoyed getting to the root of their relationship, I could tell he longed to divulge his true relationship to Ian, and Jenny, and I could see the stories dancing in Jamie’s mind. I could almost read the words that Jamie was holding on his lips – ‘I knew Ian, let me tell you about him’, but he kept them locked in his mouth after getting a shake of the head from
Griff in answer to his silent question.

“You just keep finding family this week, aye?” Griff harangued.

“So I do,” Jamie concurred.

“It seems all the Murray men in my line have a taste for the exotic. Two married Native Americans, one a woman from China, and yet another married a woman from India – I’m two kinds of Indian! It wreaked havoc on sorting out the genetics.”

“I knew young Ian had a Native American wife, but I was unaware there were any children who’d lived.”

“You say that like you knew him,” Sidney accused.

“Jamie has always been very connected to his family history,” I interjected, taking Jamie’s hand.

“Aye,” he said with a sigh and a nod, keeping his head down as it became a repeated bob. I felt him grasp my fingers, understanding the emotions he was conveying with his touch. It brought a sudden rush of heat through my body and I tightened my hold on his hand, the tension relating the urgency I was starting to feel.

“As much as I would like to stay and trade stories, we really must be going,” Jamie related to our hosts, taking care not to hurt Sidney’s feelings, or make this evening’s conversation seem unimportant to him. He reached a hand out to her especially.

“It would be my pleasure to tell you all I know of the Murray men woven into my family, and I am proud to know one branch of my family tree includes you.”

Jamie kissed the back of her hand. Griff quickly intervened, “that’s enough of that, Jamie,” in an echo of Jamie’s words to Griff earlier this afternoon.

~~~~~

It was still just early evening, not even really near dark, but we dashed toward the T station hand in hand, like a pair of eloping teenagers evading our parents. I’m sure I looked ridiculous, either being pulled or pulling Jamie along with me, letting him draw me in and kiss me while barely missing a step, but I felt overjoyed and…so young. I actually began to giggle, and I saw a smile take over all of Jamie’s face.

“If I don’t get ye to a bed soon…” he groaned in my ear, while I was clutched in his grasp.

“Maybe we should have taken Griff up on his earlier offer,” I whispered in reply.

“Know that I plan to have ye in ev’ry room of that place,” Jamie promised, his eyes telling me that was no jest. My knees felt weak, and I wanted nothing more than a horizontal surface to present itself so I could wrap my legs around his hips and pull him down on top of me.

We almost missed the stop at Park Street we were so involved with our feelings, but at the last moment, Jamie leapt to the platform and yanked me out through the doors that were beginning to close.

“I think we better reign in our thoughts until we get to the apartment,” I offered, and he chuckled and nodded his concurrence.
“Oh, Sassenach, I hope I’ve got the strength. I thought the want was unending in the days after we wed, but it is nothing compared to what two and a half centuries has fostered.”

We each took a deep breath and boarded the green line trolley that was about to pull out.
There's Gonna Be Fireworks

Chapter Notes

It seems I set myself a task equal to that of the person tasked to translate "To be or not to be" into Klingon for one of the Star Trek movies when I decided to make up a fake song title in Gaelic trying to use only the internet to make the translation. Apparently there is no direct way to translate some simple phrases, and as such I found several round about ways of translating the title in question. As such, I chose the one that seemed to make the most sense. If it is wrong I apologize in advance!

“There’s Gonna Be Fireworks”

Claire unlocked the door and carefully looked into the apartment.

She looked over her shoulder at Jamie. “I think we’re clear,” she whispered, but tensed up at hearing the record start playing in Brianna’s room, but no more so than Jamie, who stood tall, his mouth falling ajar.

“A Dhia,” he exhaled.

“I haven’t heard that one in a while,” Claire toned with recognition. “Not since the teenage rebellion years.”

“So she’s played this before?” Jamie asked.

“Only when she’s hating me,” Claire replied, sarcastically smiling.

“I see, um…”

“It’s Gaelic, right?”

As the song continued, Jamie seemed increasingly rattled.

“Aye… aye,” he nodded.

“What does it mean?” Claire asked of him.

“I hate you.”

“What?” a startled Claire retorted, giving Jamie a glare.

“The song – ‘Is beag orm thu’ – it means ‘I hate you’, well, literally it’s ‘you are disagreeable to me’, but it’s as close as you can get.”

“So, are you familiar with it, or can just translate it?”

“Aye, I’m familiar, all right. Not only that… it’s me… and my band.”
Jamie kissed Claire’s cheek and headed into her room. Claire turned on her heel and watched him head into her room.

“You were in a band?” she queried, scrambling after him, closing and locking the door before they could be heard or seen by Brianna. She leaned back against the door and stared at Jamie sitting on the arm of the chair across from the bed.

“You? In a band – let me guess – lead singer?” she joked. Jamie’s eyes widened and he nodded. “– but you can’t sing!” she exclaimed, now secured in her room.

Jamie slid back off the arm, chin and knees almost meeting as he slid down to the cushion.

“Well, I know that,” he motioned with his left hand, “and you know that,” he motioned with his right hand, “but nobody seemed to notice at the time…nor care,” he added, eyes opening wide.

Claire stalked up to him.

“You, a man who cannot carry a tune in a bucket, sang with a band?”

“It was the early 80’s - 1980’s, and it was a punk band – melody wasn’t really the point.”

Claire pressed her hands into Jamie’s palms and leaned over him in the chair.

“I’ll tell you about it, but I need to have ye naked first,” Jamie informed her, wrenching himself back up to the chair’s arm.

He stripped the shirt up and off her torso, and eased her skirt over her hips until it fell to the floor. Claire was all too glad to remove Jamie’s garb. The cargo shorts and tight t-shirt in an inadvertently matching Necco Wafer brown had made him look like an over-grown boy scout all afternoon, although it was oddly appealing in a way.

“Oh, Claire,” Jamie nearly cried, his body wracked with sensation.

The mattress had barely stopped bounding when Claire’s curiosity got the better of her.

“How, on earth, did you ever end up in a punk band – or any band for that matter?”

Jamie’s arms slid tighter around Claire’s body and he smiled.

“Like more of my careers than I would have thought – completely by accident!”

A broad smile filled Claire’s face and she laughed, thinking it was so true of Jamie’s life – he fell into situations often with no intent whatsoever.

“I was hauling casks into this little pub. I was workin’ for the distributor, so I was on a route, and far from done for the day. One of the damn casks decided to find its own inertia, and it smashed solidly on my right foot!”

“Oh!” Claire sympathized, her hand going to rub his foot. Jamie smiled at her gentle touch.

“Well, it did hurt, so I let out a right streak of blue language, loud as could be, and mostly in Gaelic. What I didn’t know was how the storage room echoed! I come up from below, limping, barely touching the ground with the one foot – and find myself to be the fox surrounded by hounds! Three young lads lookin’ down on me, mouths agape.”

Jamie rolled to his side, one arm staying across Claire’s middle.
“'Sorry for the language,' I apologized, but they just went on staring. 'Can you make that sound again?' one of them asked me. I snapped ‘What?’ and all of them backed up. The barkeep ponied up a sip of whiskey – not nearly enough to put a dent in my pain – and I dropped onto a stool in front of him. 'No breakage,' I told him, 'Unless ye count my big toe'.”

Jamie was fully engrossed in his memory.

“Then those three surrounded me again. I was in no mood so I hollered ‘What do ye want?’ Next thing I know, they’d carried me to the little stage, thrust a microphone into me hands, and said, ‘Yell like ye did – in Gaelic’.”

Jamie came back to the here and now with a chortle, and he bounced against the mattress until he’d gotten Claire tightly in his clutches again. He looked down into Claire’s face and smiled.

“Next thing I know, I’m up on stage, people yelling my words back in my face.”

“And what were you called – Jamie Fraser and the atonals?” Claire asked, poking fun at his inabilities.

“Verra funny, Sassenach, but I wasna using my real name for that – nor even the name I was goin’ by at the time.”

“A nom de guerre within a nom de guerre, as it were?”

“Aye – I was Xander Mac Dubh – feared and loved!”

Claire laughed, but stifled it quickly, bringing her hand over her mouth, hoping Brianna hadn’t heard her.

“Did you make that up?” Claire humorously inquired.

“Not me, but some of the ‘ardent’ fans – god were they trouble.”

Claire rolled her head back and forth, keeping her laughter sealed up best she could.

“You had ‘groupies’?”

“Ye find that funny, Sassenach?” Jamie asked, tightly grasping Claire at the waist.

“Yes, but I’m not surprised – you had much the same kind of following at Leoch among the young women. I should know, they all shot daggers at me for taking you off the market!”

“Aye, but at least they kept their hands to themselves...Well, most of them,” he added with a touch of trepidation. “Some of these women got so...bold – I started calling them ‘grope - ies’. I had to keep them at arm’s length, if you know what I mean!”

“What, exactly, were they groping?”

“They were quite intent in finding out what was beneath me kilt...had to start wearing an athletic supporter AND a cup.”

“That couldn’t have been comfortable,” Claire hummed, her hand moving in to do a little groping of her own. Jamie felt his cheeks warming, an almost embarrassed smile creeping up his face with the pinking of his skin.

His voice deepened and softened as he continued.
“Better than…prying a half dozen women off my ballocks each night.”

Claire gave him a squeeze. “Do tell.”

Almost whispering, he went on, “Some of the German women were the worst – you couldn’a get them to let go.”

“German women? Were they partial to punk?”

“Aye, our biggest audience turned out to be the Germans. ‘I Hate You’ was so big there, we recorded a version in German, and toured for months.”

“Why am I not surprised…what’s the song called in German?”

Jamie happily growled the translation – “Ich hasse dich”, and then moaned as Claire’s grip made his whole body clench.

“God, Sassenach, I’ve missed your hands on me, but are ye sure there’s no German in you?”

~~~~~

I heard Brianna go out, locking the door behind her. I let out a deep breath and kissed Jamie warmly. He must have been drifting near sleep, because he became attentive quickly, like he was trying cover for his slumber.

“Did I wake you?” I toned, placing a soft hand on his chest.

He smirked then pressed his lips down.

“Aye, I guess I nodded off. Sorry.”

“Bree’s gone out.”

Jamie stretched, sitting while he did so.

“Has she got the whole album, or just the 45?” Jamie asked, turning and looking back down at me, remembering what he’d been thinking when he drifted off.

“The whole album, I think – Brianna knows every little hole in the wall record store in Boston. Why?” I said, turning toward him and sitting myself.

“Well, the single was big, but the album is actually a bit on the rare side. It might be worth a bit.”

I got out of the bed and found my robe.

“Claire?” Jamie asked as I unlocked the door and opened it slightly.

“I’m curious now. I want to see what you looked like on the cover – you were on the cover, right?”

“I was on it, and I looked a damned fool!”

“Now I have to see it!” I exclaimed. I flashed an uncontrollable smile that felt evil even to me, but I was out the door and quickly down the hall. I thought a lack of easily regained clothing would keep him in my room, but I was mistaken, and heard him at my heels as I reached Bree’s room.

I picked up the empty album sleeve, my eyes popping wide open along with my mouth.
“My God,” I spouted, breaking into laughter. “That can’t be you!” I exclaimed.

Jamie took the cover from my hands and turned it over to read the back. His expression became serious.

“They were good lads.”

“Were?”

“Aye, we were killed in a plane crash. It made a few headlines at the time.”

I placed my hands on Jamie’s wrists.

“Sorry.”

He looked at me and sadly smiled.

“That was my last death.”

We stood silent for a minute, then he brought his head up and it was as if the scene had reset, his sadness spirited away.

“God, I went out in public like that!” he marveled, and I got a second look at the front cover. It was clearly my Jamie, but not any way I’d ever seen him. The only recognizable thing about him other than his dark blue eyes, and Viking derived features was the black and red tartan of the kilt wrapped around him. Dark leather boots – I couldn’t tell if they were deep red or black, and a studded black leather jacket. And the piece de resistance, his hair, was brushed up into an exaggerated pompadour that looked just like a rooster’s comb. The other members of the band were behind him, hair styled in the same fashion, but the others were dark haired, so Jamie stuck out, holding the square, old-styled microphone, the stand grasped firmly like at any moment Jamie would turn on a foe and wield it as a weapon.

“What were you called?” I asked, squinting at the stylized script on the sleeve.

“Threat of Thunder; Threat of Rain,” Jamie dramatically announced. “Aye, I know – ridiculous - pretentious even, but they were young, swept up in the whole ‘punk’ movement. But their enthusiasm was contagious. They named the band, but I named the album,” he proudly pointed out.

I looked at the cover again, searching out this title Jamie was so glad to take credit for. Printed down Jamie’s side in a feathery hand were the words ‘Cocknammon Rocks’.

“I always thought of you, reading that. The feel of you pressed in the saddle with me, warnin’ us ‘bout the redcoats. Sometimes I wished you’d fought me harder about rejoining the group, given me an excuse to carry ye on my good shoulder. I wanted my hands on ye at any cost.” His breath was warm and my skin prickled as he whispered his recollections in my ear.

“And once we’d gotten to Leoch, and we were alone together, you wrappin’ yourself around me as much as the bandages, God, had I not had so much respect for ye, and a healthy dose of fear, I’d have held you sweetly, and kept ye wrapped tight to my body ‘til mornin.”

His arms came around me and he rubbed his chin and face on me like a great cat. He raised goosebumps all over my skin.

“I remember,” I ventured, “And had I not been mourning my old life, I might have been thinking much the same. You were the first warm body I had willingly embraced in days…I do remember
how comforting you were, how...attentive you became."

I was drifting on the memories, years peeling away, the touch of his hands transporting me to a fire-lit chamber.

He kissed me behind the left ear.

“Sassenach, I will never get enough of you.”

I was on the verge of melting and turning to kiss Jamie when I noticed the paper stuck to the window here in Brianna’s room. I could hear the questioning in Jamie’s breathing as I stepped from his embrace and fingertip grabbed the note.

“Dear mother, I knew you’d come in here if you didn’t find me home. I’m with friends at the fireworks – Bree,” I read aloud. “Fireworks...I’d forgotten it was the fourth of July,” I observed, turning.

~~~~~
Leafing Out The Tree

Chapter Notes

Sorry to only be adding only a single chapter this time, but I have been wallowing in the volume 2 DVD for as long as the library would allow me to keep it, and suffering great withdrawal since returning it!!

Leafing Out The Tree

Jamie took me by the hips and pulled me close to his body yet again.

“We could…make some fireworks of our own,” he purred, the vibrations tickling my throat as he moved in for a kiss.

“Oh, I rather think we did a pretty good job with the fireworks already tonight.”

Laughter buzzed through my chest as Jamie nuzzled his way around my neck, making it quite clear how he was feeling.

“I’d forgotten how wonderful it feels to be wanted. My body hasn’t gotten used to having this…but I’m looking forward to learning it all over again.”

We made it back to my room and did manage some more fireworks of our own. Knowing Brianna was not down the hall did release my inhibitions a bit and Jamie was all too glad to take advantage. We wore each other out and happily drowsed in each other’s arms, the occasional rumble of the greenline train as soothing background music.

Jamie was looking at the album cover again. I had inadvertently kept it grasped in my hands as he maneuvered me down the hall and into bed. I watched him slide his fingertip along one of the names of his band mates. He must have thought I was still asleep because he exhaled a long, pained breath and rolled his lips into his mouth. He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing several tears onto his cheeks.

For a moment, I thought about pretending to sleep, let him retain a detached dignity, but the look on his face was breaking my heart, and my hand curved over his. He looked into my eyes and his shell broke open, leaving his eyes overflowing.

Up until now, we had been living on the surface, letting our joy of being together again rule the day. I knew it couldn’t last forever, but I assumed I would be the first one to lose the battle. Something about his time with the band had eaten into him, left a raw spot that had never scabbed over.

It had been a long time since I’d seen Jamie so vulnerable. I took him into my arms and smoothed my hands through his hair from forehead to nape, letting him find his equilibrium once again.

I kissed him on the strong chord of his neck and rubbed the wet spot I left until it dried. He was lying calmly, twisted over himself, his chin and knees inches apart. His arms stretched downward, fingers near my up-pointed toes. He was staring that direction as well.
“Can you tell me about it?” I asked.

“I will,” he spoke, “but I’m not sure you’ll like to hear it.”

“I may not like it, but if it has you this unraveled, it’s likely something I should know…Does it have anything to do with the item I saw you slip in your pocket at Griff’s?”

Jamie smirked shallowly.

“You saw that, did you? Should have known your eagle eyes would pick that up.”

I continued to brush my fingers through Jamie’s hair until he took hold of my hands and gave them a squeeze. He was still staring toward my feet, looking off into space, or looking inward more likely.

“One of my band mates…he was my kin…”

I reached for the album sleeve and flipped it over to read the names of the men who comprised Threat of Thunder; Threat of Rain.

“Which one?” I asked, my voice sounding unnaturally high pitched, and a bit strained.

I thrust the cover toward Jamie’s hands and he pointed to a name.

“The bass player,” he informed me. The room was dark, so I squinted a bit and made out the name.

“Ransom MacLeod?”

Jamie nodded.

“Great name for a punk musician,” I commented.

“Aye – and that’s why I suspected who he was – that name. Turns out I was right. He was my six times great grandson…descended from a son I sired in 1758.”

“A son? Jamie, in all the research we did – Roger did, there was no mention of…”

“I was not allowed to claim him, but he was my son, and I loved him.”

“Of course you did. Jamie, I would never doubt the love you have for a child. It’s just…I thought I was prepared…”

I did my best to control the little stab I felt in my heart, but Jamie knew what his words had done to me. He sat and pulled my head into his shoulder. I felt numb. I thought I knew his family tree by heart, but this limb was completely unknown to me.

“Actually, you began the chain of events that led to his existence when you saved John Grey.”

I lifted my head from Jamie’s shoulder, glaring at him in disbelief.

“I began – Who?”

“Lord John Grey was the sixteen year old boy who tried to save you from my savage wantonness – you set his broken arm.”

“That slight, blond boy? What could he have to do…wait…that name…John Grey. He was…oh
God, Jamie…I remember that name from somewhere in the research.”

“Ardsmuir,” Jamie simply stated.

“He was the last Governor of the prison I was sent to…It was hard fought, but we became friends, in a way.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I had been hit square in the face with two hundred and fifty year old reality. Somehow, I was responsible for a son Jamie fathered, but could not raise because I had set the arm of an English boy who had sought to free me from what he perceived as savage Scots bent on taking advantage of me. I knew I could not, truly, be responsible for what had happened in my absence, but it hurt me to think my compassion led Jamie into such a situation.

“I don’t understand, Jamie. I think you better start at the beginning.”

His expression was a cross of a pout and a smirk, and I think his eyes sparkled for a split-second.

“Well, you know about my years at Ardsmuir?”

“That your own tenants turned you in? Yes, we found…”

“That’s not how it was – I told them to turn me in.”

My eyes must have betrayed the shock I felt, because Jamie shook his head slightly and smiled.

“The price on my head kept all the tenants of Lallybroch from starving. I was doin’ them no good by my hidin’, and after you’ve lived in a cave, prison seems somehow preferable if the goin’ there will save the people you love.”

When he made statements like that, I just wanted to hold Jamie tight. At times there seemed no end to what he would do for others, no matter the risk to himself. I both loved him and hated him for that.

He proceeded to tell me how he came to befriend, and even feel warmly toward John Grey. How he very well could have ended up as an indentured servant in colonial America had Lord John not felt the urge to keep Jamie close to hand. Jamie told me about his years at Helwater, the estate John Grey took him to in lieu of sending him across the sea, and of his subsequent blackmail by one of the young ladies of the family that resided there, leading him to her bed, and to the existence of his son, William Clarence Henry George Ransom.

He told me all the startling details of the child’s start in life – his mother’s death just hours after his birth, and how his legal father attempted to kill the infant as retribution for knowing he had been fathered by someone else. I cried as he told me about the time he was allowed to spend with the boy, though he noted he almost always had to be cautious not to seem too familiar with a person of titled status, even with that person being but a child, and his child at that. I bit my lip as he told me how the child was growing to resemble him, and that he had no choice but to move on before it became evident to all.

He explained that though John Grey had other leanings, he married into the boy’s family and became his ersatz father, pledging to see the boy well cared for and loved. I took this all in, wide-eyed and open-hearted, and managed to keep my baser emotions at bay even though the thought that none of this would have happened had I been able to return to his side after Culloden kept spinning in my mind.

And I would have kept it all in check had it not been for that item Griff returned to Jamie this afternoon – a miniature portrait of the boy. A portrait - the Polaroid of its time – that could have
just as easily been a picture of Brianna at the same age. I gasped, loudly, when confronted with the picture. I had felt the shivers coming up from the base of my spine as he retrieved his shorts and the portrait in the pocket. I was shaking in his arms. He held me tighter and pulled the covers around me to my neck.

“My God, Jamie,” I turned and looked into his eyes.

“This could be Brianna – they are nearly identical.”

“I know. That’s what struck me this afternoon, and nearly the exact words I uttered…it’s why Griff said I must tell you about William, soon as possible.”

“So, you stayed in touch…with John Grey? I mean William is much older in this than when you had to leave him.”

“Aye, we crossed paths over the years…He…helped me through some rough patches.”

“Did you…ever get to be close to William?”

“The closest I ever got were those first years. After that, I only saw him a handful of times, and only one of those times did he see me as well.”

I brushed my fingers along Jamie’s jaw, moving from ear to ear. I longed to take the pain from his eyes, but I knew some pain ran so deep there was no way to remove it completely, only the ability to live with it when you must, and ignore it the rest of the time. He nodded his understanding, his eyes narrowing for a moment until he forced them shut.

“I saw him the day he was born, and I saw him the day he died, but not once did I see him call me father.”

He sighed, but he was all cried out by now. There was more to be spoken of, in time, about his other interactions with William, and the lingering relationship he shared with John Grey, and how the two were intertwined, but tonight, we nestled close together, and at long last, we were there to exchange dreams, and take each other into a night-long sleep, the rest of the world be damned.

~~~~~
I awoke to Jamie’s face staring down at me. His smile was sweet, but a bit sad. He had been studying my face while I slept, and his hand hovered just above my skin.

“Don’t let me stop you,” I hummed, and he allowed his thumb to stroke my cheek.

I smiled at his touch, and snuggled in against him, putting my arms around his chest and sliding my hands up the back of his neck. I rolled to my back, and compelled Jamie to roll with me.

“Are we hiding out until Brianna leaves this morning?”

“Nah, she’s come and gone already. I didna want to slip away and not have you know where I was…not after last night.”

Jamie closed his eyes and was quiet until I put my hand under his chin and kissed him possessively.

“I know it was difficult for you to hear -“

“Shh,” I quieted him. “I needed to know, and you needed to tell me. I have no right to really be upset…you had no way to know if you would ever see me again, and it’s not as if you told me you’d found a deep and abiding love. What happened happened, and frankly, I think the world would be all the better should more of it have descended from you. You merely caught me by surprise last night.”

Jamie opened his mouth as if to respond, but closed it again, and nodded strongly, a relieved smile the last thing I saw as he pulled me tight once more.

When I woke the next time, Jamie was just finishing lacing up his boots.

“You’re going?” I grunted, grasping my blanket in a ball in front of me.

“Aye,” he replied, turning his head over his shoulder. He turned and kissed me quick.

“Griff and I still have some stuff to hash out…”

Jamie hesitated, but clearly had something he wanted to say. He took in a deep breath and looked at
me once more.

“I know I haven’t really asked…not officially, but…will you live with me at Griff’s? Now that I’ve found ye, I want ev’ry minute I can have.”

Jamie’s shy but expectant smile warmed me straight through.

“Of course I will.”

I thought he might fly right out my window.

~~~~~

For the next several days, Jamie was busy clarifying what Griff wanted of him in the year to come, and even that short separation had me finding myself with excess energy to burn, and a need to keep my hands busy. I visited the self-storage locker that held my possessions, thinking about what I would bring with me to Griff’s house, but I had one other task in mind as well – get the pictures!

I was on my feet after the first tap of his knuckles on the door, and I pulled Jamie into the common room.

“What’s got you so fired up?” he asked, beginning to smile.

“And what’s all this, then?” he swept his hand in the direction of a storage tub sitting on the coffee table.

“I got Bree’s pictures out of storage. I thought you might like to look at them. I know it’s not the same as having been here, but…I want to share…whatever I have. It might be some time before our daughter will let you into her life, but I’ve got some of the best moments captured here.”

“Will she mind me bein’ here?”

“She’s gone for the day – an outing with some friends.”

I reached out my hands and smiled up at Jamie, wanting so much to share our daughter’s life with him. He came with me to the couch, and we sat angled so our knees were touching. I opened the first page of Brianna’s baby book, and saw a picture I’d forgotten about. It was me, one week before Brianna was born. Fiona had collected me from the hospital after a startlingly real-feeling false labor. She’d snapped a shot of me struggling from the wheelchair they insisted I exit the building in. I was humped backward, belly protruding a foot in front of me, but I was smiling, nonetheless. I heard him gasp lightly as he traced his fingers above the surface of the picture. He’d never seen me that pregnant.
“I forgot about that,” I softly spoke, leaning my head to Jamie’s shoulder. His arm went around my shoulder and his hand slipped to my belly.

“What did it feel like for you? I mean, I remember how Jenny described it, but I would think it is a unique feeling to each person, is it not?”

“Jenny captured it pretty well, but I think she really liked being pregnant, and felt secure and pretty sure of the outcome.”

“Aye, until she lost one – the redcoats scared her into early labor – it was after you’d gone, Sassenach, and after that…well, no one felt secure about anything.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a knot in my chest.

“It was nothing you could have changed, Claire, and I didna mean to imply so.”

“I know…but there’s so much of your life I don’t know now. I know the big stuff – at least for your first life – well, second, actually. Roger found a paper trail after Culloden, but the minutia of day to day – it’s lost to history. Only you know what the records don’t show.”

We were quiet for a bit. In the excitement of seeing each other again, it was easy to forget how much of our lives were unknown to each other, but whenever we started to talk about events, moments that we lived in our separate lives, that hint of loss crept in. Jamie turned the page, and I felt his throat working. Brianna and I were both matted down, me from the efforts of labor, Brianna from being wiped clean in the moments following birth. The look of amazement on my face as they had just handed my baby to me – Jamie was already breathing deeply to control his emotions, and it was only the first picture of Bree.

“So small,” he whispered.

I nodded against this shoulder so he could know my response without having to look away from the picture, but he turned and smiled at me anyway. He reluctantly turned the next page, wanting to keep every image in front of his eyes, but knowing to see the next meant looking away from the last.

I put my hand on his chest, feeling each flutter of his heart. Jamie was voraciously absorbing the images of his daughter’s childhood – all the firsts, from steps and teeth to school and pets, and so much of the in-between as well. I had been relentless in documenting Brianna’s life. I wanted more than birth, marriage and death to be her legacy.

Jamie sucked in a breath as ten year old Bree stared up at him – hair chopped short, looking very boyish.
“William,” he breathed. “You were right - she looks the image of him there. Just like the portrait John gave me – how’d she come to have such short hair?”

“She wanted it like that.”

“And you let her?”

“You should have seen what my hair looked like at the time! And she loved it…for about three weeks,” I laughed.

He still looked unnerved.

“There’s nothing wrong with girls wearing their hair short, you know.”

“Och, I know, but to see the resemblance, to see my son in my daughter’s face.”

“Strong genetics – I would hazard any child of yours would look remarkably like Brianna and William.”

“Perhaps so,” he stopped before launching into the rest of his sentence.

“But I always thought had Faith lived she would be the image of you.”

Jamie traced my cheek and jaw like he was sketching me with the soft pastel of his fingertip. I had to close my eyes.

By the silence that followed, I think Jamie understood that whether it be the twenty some-odd years since I had lost Faith or the two hundred fifty some-odd years since he had experienced her loss, neither of us would ever really be over it, and just now, evoking the image of what she might have looked like, had opened two deep wells of painful memory. We both wanted to remember her and wanted to forget we shared such a loss.

I suddenly had a hand encasing each of my shoulders from behind as Jamie pulled me to his chest. I heard him gulp and breathe heavily.

“I’m sorry, Sassenach.”

I nodded heavily.

After we’d each had time to put Faith back in the recesses of our minds, I felt Jamie start to chuckle, his shoulders shaking and hunching as he looked at another picture. I opened my eyes and saw him smiling broadly, shaking his head in the slightest.
“She’s the fierce one, aye? Looks like she’s headed into battle.”

“She made the varsity lacrosse team as a freshman,” I proudly recounted, looking at her with two great smears of eye black, mouth guard looking like an orange peel clenched in her teeth, and various bits of plastic armor on her body.

Jamie just eyed me.

“It means she was younger than most of the team, and taller by a head as well. She’s a hell of an athlete – everything she’s ever tried she’s been good at.”

He puffed up proudly at that idea. Page by page he learned her passions and personality as much as pictures could allow. I was riding the roller-coaster of emotions and expressions along with him, remembering how I had pictured him on the sidelines of her games, in the stands as she excelled on the floor, sitting front row center when she braved the stage. There were times I think I was more deeply emotional remembering these events than Jamie was seeing them for the first time, but it very well could have been his inscrutable mask blocking me from seeing how close to tears he was.

Jamie had pulled every album, seen every photograph, but there remained two boxes at the bottom of the storage tub – one contained my jewelry and keepsakes, the other a number of jump drives and memory cards containing the videos I had taken of Brianna over the years. Jamie fought the urge to touch the screen as she moved across it. I started him off slow – images of Brianna refusing to be fed, learning how much she liked the word ‘no’ – a montage I had made at a time when she was being particularly difficult in her teenage years.

“Had they a way to capture such images when I was wee, I have no doubt it would have looked like that,” he insisted, looking delighted to have had such an impact on who his daughter was.

“No doubt,” I reassured, tousling his hair and pecking him on the cheek.

“She must have been a real handful – still is, really, isn’t she?”

“You have no idea,” I declared, “But…I was always glad that I could see you in her – beyond the physical, I mean.”

“Aye,” he faltered, his mouth twisting up as he shut down for a moment.

I next selected a video I hoped would lighten his mood at bit. He sat up straight and his eyes lit with excitement. He pulled the laptop computer onto his knees.
“How old?” he asked, turning to inquire.

“She was twelve.”

“She mastered the sword dance!” he excitedly emitted.

“As I said, she’s good at everything.”

As some of the videos were quite loud, and I didn’t wish to disturb the neighbors through the walls (though one of them held no such qualms), I set Jamie up with a pair of headphones, and let him loose to explore the videos of his daughter.

At one point he sat back and rolled each shoulder back, relaxing muscles that had been tensed in hunching over the screen too long. I put my hand on his shoulder.

“Enough?” I mouthed.

He burst into broad smile and shook his head. He couldn’t stop. He needed every single image and sound of her that his brain could get ahold of. If the Vulcan mind meld had been a real thing, I am sure Jamie would be placing his hands strategically on my face to read my memories, and he would want to do the same with Brianna. And I would have done it too – anything to give Jamie back the years he could not have with his child.

Jamie slid off the edge of the couch and leaned his back against my legs, tilting his head back to soothe his neck. I took my fingers to his neck and shoulders, feeling the knots relent beneath my touch and he moaned, his face taking on expressions I rarely saw outside the bedroom. I stopped the impromptu massage, sliding my hands under his arms and circling his shoulder joints like a living backpack. I slipped one earphone aside.

“After you’re done here, why don’t we get something to eat? I’m starving.”

“Sounds good,” he purred, but I saw how he wanted to get back to ingesting Brianna’s life, so I delayed him no more, settled his earphones back in place, and let him get on with watching his daughter grow up through a lens eye view.

~~~~~

I had curled up on the couch behind Jamie, looking over his shoulder to watch the videos with him in case he had any questions. I sighed contentedly, and reached out to touch Jamie – I was craving the feel of contact. He turned his head to me and nodded. He had already taken in so much this afternoon I thought his mind might overload, but he was emanating this sense of satiety, the warmth and fullness of a man at peace. His eyes sparkled with joy.
Jamie was calmly ensconced in the past, fully immersed in the world of Brianna's childhood when I heard a light thud on the landing of the apartment. I slowly rose back to a seated position and stretched my neck to look over the back of the couch. My feeling of peace was suddenly gone as Brianna came into the apartment.

“Mom, I’m back,” she called out, apparently not seeing me, as she went and knocked on my bedroom door.

I kept quiet, not sure what to do, and when I did try to say something, no sound came out. Bree came back up the hall and half-way made the turn into the kitchen, spying me out of the corner of her eyes.

“Oh, there you are,” she observed.

She looked like she was about to tell me something when she noticed Jamie seated on the floor.

“What’s this?” she demanded, pointing at the pictures surrounding us.

“Why are you showing him my baby pictures?”

I found myself flailing my arms at the air, unable to speak, knowing nothing I could say would defuse her. I saw Jamie turn to face her and push the headphones off. I noticed the tears in the corners of his eyes as he looked up at Brianna, streaks down his cheeks showing he had, indeed, been crying. I don’t know why, but the look on his face seemed to freeze Brianna in place, and she suddenly looked sympathetically at him. She tilted her head. She looked to be about to reach a hand out to Jamie, but she grabbed one hand with the other and pulled them both against her chest.

While they were locked in a moment, I took the computer to see what it was that had brought Jamie to tears. There on the screen I saw Bree taking her curtain call from her middle school production of Peter Pan – she was Peter. I had a feeling I knew what had pushed Jamie to tears. Brianna’s big song was called “I won’t grow up”, extolling the virtues of a perpetual childhood, a refusal to become an adult. I can see how it must have struck Jamie on a visceral level. He looked at me and swallowed hard.

“Mom, why is he crying?” I heard Brianna ask.

She was looking right at him, and he raised his eyes to her again.

“I missed so much,” he spoke to her.

She shifted her weight uneasily.
“Mom – I don’t understand. What does he mean?”

She was speaking to me, but her eyes remained locked on Jamie. I pressed a hand on Jamie’s shoulder and then stood.

“He means just what he said – he missed a lot of your life, and I gave him back what of it I could. I know you still don’t believe me, but he is your father. And he is a man of strong emotions, so it breaks his heart to know what he missed.”

I heard Jamie let out a deep sigh as he wrapped his arms around my waist and buried his face into the back of my neck. I hadn’t heard him get up from the floor or move toward me, but there he was. I rested my arms on top of his.

“Please,” I pleaded, “give him a chance?”

Brianna’s eyes looked glassy, but she was fighting against tears forming, wanting still to hate Jamie. She looked down and puffed out a breath.

“OK,” she reluctantly agreed. “I’ll try…did you have to show him all my pictures?”

~~~~~
With a tentative truce in place, we ordered take out for three. Neither Jamie nor I wanted to go out in public just now, and with Brianna willing to join us, I let her choose whose take-out we would get. My daughter has more of a sadistic side then I would like to admit – I am sure she chose Chinese food in an attempt to show her superior skills in handling chop sticks, a skill set that I was sadly lacking. I think she might have begun to regret that choice when Jamie called in our order – in Chinese.

I smirked when I saw the shock on her face.

“Did I forget to mention, your father is a polyglot,” I quipped.

~~~~~

A lot of smiling and nodding took place while we waited for our food to arrive. I was out of my seat quickly when the door buzzer sounded, telling us our food had arrived in the lobby. Money in hand, I made my escape before either Jamie or Brianna could twitch a muscle.

“I’ll be right back,” I announced.

I saw a look of horror register on both their faces as I left them alone with each other.

~~~~~

Brianna set about getting plates and glasses, trying very hard not to look at Jamie, but her task was done well before Claire had the chance to return. Brianna stood by the tall part of the counter resting on her elbows, breathing uneasily as she saw Jamie walking over. She looked at him briefly, biting her lip and hunching her shoulders. Jamie leaned his elbows on the counter far enough away that Brianna wouldn’t feel crowded, but close enough that he could speak softly and still be heard.

“You’re quite talented, lass…very…capable.”

“Um…thank-you?” she up-inflection-ed.

“I’m sorry if you think me lookin’ at your pictures is an…intrusion. I think she felt she…owed it to me.”

Jamie took the small portrait of William from his pocket. He’d been carrying it ever since Griff returned it to him.

“I think this was why.”

Jamie turned the portrait to Brianna so she could look at it. Her eyes narrowed and her lips drew thin.

“Where did you – ?” she began, thinking at first it was an image of her. She turned and looked at Jamie’s face, a million questions evident in her features.

“He’s my son, William.”
“Son?…So…I have a…brother?” Bree hesitated.

“Had one.”

“Where is he? What happened to him? Mom never mentioned – “

“She didna know of him until a few days ago.”

While neither of them spoke for a bit, you could almost hear Brianna’s thoughts.

“So…he had a different mother?” she said in a very controlled voice.

“Aye,” he said with a nod.

“I thought my mom was the love of your life.”

“Aye, she is.”

“But you had a child with another woman.”

Brianna’s voice held disappointment, but a note of satisfaction as she thought her original opinion of Jamie was spot on.

“You can make all the excuses you want – you cheated on my mom. Is this other woman going to pop up out of time and lay claim to you?”

“No.”

“How can you be so sure? I mean…”

“She’s dead from having him,” Jamie spouted, “And I never meant to be in her bed! The woman threatened my family and all I valued unless I…” Jamie stopped himself abruptly, feeling that, although he owed no loyalty to a woman who would force him to her bed, he wasn’t sure he owed it to Brianna to tell her how her brother came to be.

“Unless you what?” Brianna sternly asked.

Jamie took a breath, a moment to think what to say.

“The young lady had been betrothed to a man three times her age. She wanted me to…oh, God…she wanted…she intercepted a letter from my sister, and threatened to put them in danger if I didn’t…” His voice trailed off again.

“Oh,” Brianna uttered. “She blackmailed you?”

Jamie dropped his head.

“Aye. And she paid with her life.”

Brianna slowly put a hand on top of Jamie’s on the counter, looking at how similar their hands looked, but refusing to look up into his face, fearing the little spark of compassion. It was just then that Claire twisted the knob and the door opened a crack. Brianna snapped her hand back like flames were licking at her fingertips.
“I’ll go help Mom,” she blurted, quickly striding away on her long legs.

Jamie turned and followed her with his eyes, letting out a held breath. It was a start.

~~~~~

Claire saw Jamie’s smile as she drew closer and she raised an eyebrow at him, reciprocating the smile for a moment, but tried not to overd o the look of happiness in front of Brianna. Carton after carton was pulled from the bags and set on the table, and a scattering of fortune cookies fell along with the wrapped disposable chop sticks and packets of soy and duck sauce when the nearly empty bags were turned over to pour out what remained. More than once Jamie and Brianna grabbed for the same boxes, Brianna scowling but Jamie unable to suppress a smile, at least from his eyes.

Claire was holding a smile at bay each time she saw these brief interactions. They were so much alike.

“So, I see you’re good with chop sticks too,” Claire motioned, gladly plying a fork to get her food to her mouth.

“I’m surprised you canna manage them, Sassenach,” Jamie teased.

Claire smiled, but Brianna tilted her head like a dog hearing a high pitch.

“Sassenach?” Bree questioned.

“Aye,” Jamie hummed, putting his hand over Claire’s.

“It’s a term of endearment, sweetie,” Claire answered her daughter, “But only the way your father says it.”

Claire and Jamie smirked at each other, slightly blushing.

“What does it really mean then?” she asked, then shoved a long noodle into her mouth pushed along by the chop sticks.

“Outlander – it’s what the Scots called the English, probably still do.”

“That doesn’t sound very endearing to me,” Brianna bantered, staring at Claire and Jamie clutching hands.

“It’s all in the pronunciation,” Jamie burred with a stronger accent than normal.

“Bree, when we met, all Jamie knew was that I was English. It was some time before we were on a first name basis,” Claire enlightened.

Claire and Jamie smiled at each other, memories dancing through their heads.

“Don’t do that,” Brianna complained, clearly reading the happy thoughts on her mother’s face.

“Sorry,” Claire hummed, blushing a bit more as Jamie squeezed her hand yet again, and then let it go.

Another strained minute of silence passed before the sounds of eating were superseded with voices.

“When did you learn Chinese, Jamie?” Claire asked between bites. “It wasn’t one of the languages you had last I knew.”
Jamie’s face busted into a smile with a puff of a laugh.

“Well, let’s see…” he pondered, “I made the acquaint of a Chinaman during my years in Edinburgh, so…that’d be more or less twenty year after ye left, Sassenach - learned a lot from him, too, the language notwithstanding.”

“Like what?” Claire further questioned.

“The wee man taught me to control my seasickness. Turned me into a damned pincushion, but I was able to handle being asea, at least – not that I enjoy it, mind ye!”

“Some kind of acupuncture?” Claire inquired between bites.

“Aye. I never would have done it left to myself, but…Joan insisted when I took her and Marsali and Fergus to France.”

Jamie turned to look at Brianna.

“The girls were my step-daughters, and Fergus was like a son…to us.”

He looked back at Claire and she smiled at him.

“Yes…he was,” Claire ventured.

“Did he…” Claire began, “did he have a good life?”

“Overall, I’d say he did well…he…found love – married my Marsali, had wonderful children of his own. It wasn’t all good, losing the hand, losing one of the bairns. Times were not always what he hoped for, but he was a good man.”

Brianna sat and listened to all this, shoveling food in like she was watching an engaging scene on TV.

“Who were their mothers?” Bree asked curtly, curious but not wanting to look like she really cared.

“Fergus, we don’t know for sure, although there’s a bit of a story there…for another time. Marsali and Joan were the daughters of my second…wife,” Jamie struggled to say.

Claire stood and walked to the fridge abruptly, stopping Jamie before he named the woman. Brianna read her mother’s body language and Jamie’s reaction to Claire’s reaction, and knew she had struck a raw nerve between the pair of them. There must be one hell of a story, she surmised, tucking the tidbit away for future use.

When Claire returned to the table, the thread of the earlier conversation was severed. Brianna watched as a look passed between her parents, Jamie looking remorseful, and Claire adrift in a sea of memories, but smiling sadly when he touched her hand again.

After the lull, it took some time for Claire to find her voice again.

“Did you say Fergus lost a hand?” A concerned Claire asked.

“Aye – Red Coats – it was an accident, but still…considering his expertise, a devastating loss.”

“His expertise?” Brianna questioned. “Was he an artist or something?”

With a sheepish grin passing between the pair, Claire finally gave voice to their reluctance.
“Pickpocket,” she softly said.

Brianna leaned back and almost took her chair over as well.

“What?” she exclaimed, sputtering into a cough, her face turning red.

Seeing Brianna’s distress, Jamie was quickly on his feet. He looked to Claire to see if she had any instructions for what to do to help their daughter. She reached her hand up flat to stop Jamie from making any move for the moment, watching to see if Bree was simply coughing or if she was choking on something. She stood and put a hand on the table edge as her breathing calmed. Claire handed her her glass.

“Small, slow sips,” she suggested, getting slow nods from Brianna.

“You OK, lass?” Jamie queried. She nodded a couple of more times, looking at Jamie this time, seeing fear on the edge of terror in his eyes.

Claire slid her hand into Jamie’s hand and stepped closer to him, trying to calm him with her proximity. She was surprised how icy his hand felt in hers, and knew his look of concern was more than skin deep. Brianna let out a deep breath and her face began to regain its normal color. She put down her glass and placed that hand on the edge of the table as well, standing bent as she recovered from the body wracking cough. Without a word, Bree sat back down, leaned against the back of her chair and tilted her head back.

“Stop staring,” she growled into the air. Jamie and Claire looked at each other, each smiling with relief. Jamie extended his arm to escort Claire back to her chair and then retook his seat.

“Sorry I caught you so off guard,” Claire apologized.

“God, it’s like I don’t know a thing about you!” Brianna spewed.

“It was a very different world,” Jamie related. “What was…acceptable, necessary…would be…unthinkable today.”

“Bree, we were trying to stop a war…trying to prevent the end of a way of life,” Claire added impassioned.

“My mom…the straight-laced doctor,” Brianna commented with the slow shake of her head. “It’s like families that find out that one of their parents was a bomb making radical - on the run from the law, assuming new identities, and living the quiet life until ‘dot dot dot’,” she air quoted, like she had been reading the blurb on a book jacket.

Jamie smiled.

“Ye paint quite the scene with your words, lass,” he complimented.

Brianna cast a non-committal glance at Jamie, then turned to her mother and rolled her eyes. Claire raised her eyebrows and smiled with one side of her face at Jamie, relaying that she thought Bree might actually be softening to him.

“I think it’s time to open our fortune cookies,” Claire urged.

Her whole face lit up at the twin scoffing reactions she garnered from Jamie and Brianna.

“Oh, my non-believers, here,” she purred, sliding one packaged cookie across the table to each of
them and batting a third one toward herself.

There was a rattling of plastic as each cookie was freed and a snap and crumble as the little slips of paper were revealed.

“Your greatest desire will come true,” Jamie read. He reached out his hand for Claire. Brianna turned away before her parents were able to touch each other, still not comfortable seeing her mother as anything but her mother.

She cleared her throat and unfolded the little slip from her cookie. “You will soon embark on a new life…well that’s a fortune few could dispute in a college town!” she editorialized. “What’s yours say, mom?”

“What you thought lost forever has never been far from your reach – how wonderfully vague.”

“It’s like horoscopes, you can make the words fit anything that’s happening in your life,” Brianna charged. “It doesn’t mean anything,” she scoffed.

“I’m afraid I’ve got to agree with her, Claire. Though, for us…they seem remarkably on target.”

“Poppycock,” Brianna pronounced, affecting her best imitation of her mother’s voice.

Claire laughed, and Jamie hummed a tone. By the look in his eyes Jamie was delighted. Just sharing a room with Claire and the daughter he barely knows lightened his heart immeasurably.

Brianna stood and began clearing her glass and plate away to the sink.

“Done?” she asked her mother.

“Thank-you for clearing away.”

Jamie looked up to see Bree’s face again.

“Anything I can help with?” he asked hopefully.

“I’ve got it,” she replied, taking his dishes as well.

Jamie smiled in a subdued manner, looking Claire in the eye and then dropping his head into an easy series of nods, his lips pressed tight together. With a sigh, he stood and waited for Brianna to come back from the sink.

“I’d like to thank you, lass, for letting me share this time with you and your mother…and for all the memories in the pictures and videos.”

He kept his head down, but his eyes shifted up, hoping to see her looking back. A slight blush came up on his cheeks when Brianna actually looked at him and smiled for a second.

“It’s alright…I guess,” she hesitated.

“I’ll be leaving, then…I hope we can…do this again.”

Jamie turned away quickly, feeling tears rushing up on him uncontrollably. Before he got too far away, Brianna unexpectedly grabbed for Jamie’s hand. It wasn’t quite a handshake, and it didn’t last long, but they each bent their fingers over to lock their hands together. Brianna could see how watery Jamie’s eyes were becoming, so she nodded at him and let him go.
Claire followed him to the door, grasping him by the shoulders for their goodbyes. They didn’t say a word, but when the first tear let go and crawled down Jamie’s cheek, Claire wiped it away and pulled his forehead down to hers. They swayed side to side several times; he gave her a quick kiss, and slipped out the door before he completely melted.
Tell Me How You Really Feel

Chapter Notes

I've been having internet connection issues during the holidays (and no library time to make up for what wasn't working at home), so it took me a bit longer than I wanted to get this chapter posted. I hope the wait wasn't too bad. And if you're thinking "only one chapter after waiting ?", I have almost 150 pages of story written, and what's been coming to me has been down the path a bit, but if you don't write it when it comes, sometimes, it doesn't come again. I am so excited about scenes I want to get out to you, but they won't work as well out of context, so...

Tell Me How You Really Feel

Claire made her way to the couch only to find Brianna already sitting there, pawing through the pile of albums. She moved close and kissed Bree on the forehead.

“He told me about William,” Brianna offered, “That picture…”

“I know,” Claire answered as she sat next to Bree and patted her hand on her daughter’s knee.

“When Jamie showed the portrait to me the first time, I felt a little sick.”

“It doesn’t bother you that he had a child with another woman?” Bree seriously asked.

“Knowing the situation, no. He was protecting his family…and he didn’t set out to have a child with her…and…I couldn’t expect him to be celibate since I wasn’t.”

Claire couldn’t make eye contact with Brianna for a moment.

“It’s a little strange…to know I had a brother, one who looked so much like me, and know I’ll never meet him.”

“I know. I would have liked the chance to meet him myself…to know if he was like Jamie or only looked like him.”

Claire smiled dreamily, thinking about what it might have been like to know William, to see him side by side with Brianna. She was so caught up in her own thoughts she almost didn’t hear what Brianna said next.

“How come you can so easily accept that he had a child with another woman, but you almost swallowed your own face when he mentioned his second wife?”

The dreamy smile faded from Claire’s face and her eyes turned beady and her gaze narrowed. She stood and walked behind the sofa, putting a physical barrier between them to accompany the emotional barrier she was attempting to put up. Claire’s hands fisted and her jaw became set. Brianna twisted on the couch to watch her mother’s transformation.
“I haven’t seen you look like this since…since Roger gave you the completed family tree.”

Bree’s eyes lit up and she began to smile.

“You knew her, didn’t you? The second wife – you actually knew her!”

The huff of breath Claire released told Brianna she was right.

“Yes, I knew her,” Claire spewed, barely opening her mouth. “She was a spiteful, mean-spirited child.”

“She thought Jamie was hers for the taking, even after we were married!”

“That…BITCH.”

“Tell me how you really felt about her, Mom,” Brianna quipped.

“Do you know what she did?” Claire rhetorically questioned, whirling around from behind the couch to stand in front of her daughter again.

“She got me arrested as a witch! Had Jamie not come to my rescue, I would have been burned at the stake because a jealous teenager thought she belonged in his bed! I hated every fiber of her being.”

“And he married her knowing this?” Brianna questioned, eyebrows knitting.

Claire exhaled heavily, dropping her chin to her chest.

“No…I never told him how I came to be in the place I was arrested, but he knew she wished ill will on our union – left a bundle of bones and plants under our bed – an evil charm – God knows what it might have done if we hadn’t been on the floor instead of in the bed -”

Brianna’s mouth dropped open and she began to laugh as she saw Claire’s face pinking up.

“Wow, Mom, you really aren’t the person I always thought you were.”

~~~~~

My face was a dark cloud with eyes that could shoot lightning. I pushed back the albums on the coffee table and sat opposite Brianna. I hated myself just now. More than two hundred years had elapsed, but the things that woman had done could still bring forth a level of anger and jealousy that stung me to the core. Brianna was right. If I’d never known her, it wouldn’t have this power over me. I didn’t know William, or the woman Jamie had been with to make him, and I held no such emotions toward them, but the knife had been twisting in my heart from the moment I followed the line on Jamie’s family tree that lead straight to -

“So what was her name?” Brianna asked.

“Laoghaire.”

~~~~~

The next few weeks were a whirlwind. With Jamie’s help, I slowly emptied my rented storage locker, and my bedroom, taking most of my belongings to Griff’s house. We really didn’t have time to get into deep discussions, and maybe that was good right now. I was having dreams about throttling Laoghaire, hurting her in all possible ways, and waking with a smile on my lips after each
imagined thing I did to her. I felt bad that I felt so good thinking about hurting her, but I hoped it would dull my anger so when Jamie and I did speak of her I would be able to do so with a civil tongue.

Brianna allowed Jamie to come to eat with us several times a week, and she didn’t even seem to mind when the two of us decided we could not say goodnight at the door, and closed ourselves into my bedroom. Things were progressing nicely. Bree and Jamie were even starting to talk and get to know each other – she even hugged him, but it unraveled moments later.

After Jamie’s quick hug with Brianna, he wrapped me in his arms and kissed me. We stood staring into each other’s eyes.

“So, I’ll pick you up tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yes,” I affirmed. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“You have plans for tomorrow?” Brianna quizzed.

“Yes – I told you I was moving out before I got in the way of your roommates,” I re-informed her.

“So…you’re helping mom move?” she addressed toward Jamie.

“Aye,” he said with a nod, “I’ve been counting the days.”

Brianna’s visage darkened noticeably.

“Gotten tired of dealing with your reluctant daughter?” she spat out, crossing her arms on her chest.

Jamie tilted his head curiously. “I doona ken,” he burred.

“Only too happy to get her somewhere I won’t get in the way?”

“Bree!” I admonished.

“Well, how am I supposed to feel? He’s ‘counting the days’ until you move into your own place. I’ve been trying – really – Mom, you can see that, can’t you? I know I’ve been reluctant to believe…”

Brianna looked truly hurt. I found myself with her head rather heavily leaned on my shoulder.

“Sweetie, he’s not counting the days until he doesn’t have to deal with you.”

“He’s not?” she sniffed.

“He’s counting the days until I move in with him.”

“Oh,” she hummed.

There was only a beat, a moment of silence before her entire demeanor shifted. Her head came up slowly, and she backed out of my arms.

“What?” she yelped.

“You can’t mean that!”

She took several steps away from me and then turned back sharply.
“You can’t move in with him – I won’t allow it!” she ordered.

“You’ve only known him - ”

“Two-hundred fifty years?” Jamie interrupted.

I held my smirk, but felt my cheeks pinking, and knew Brianna would be displeased if she felt we were taking this too lightly.

“But…Mom.”

She suddenly had me close to tears. The look of abandonment emanating from her features was sending every moment of separation we had experienced to me in an unending stream – the first day of school…first sleep-away camp…all the way up to the day she left for college. It was clear that to her this moment was just as rending – I was leaving her for Jamie.

“Bree…you’re not losing me. I’ll be closer than I have been the last couple of years – just a T ride away, and you are welcome to visit any time.”

Jamie came up behind me.

“Aye, lass, I was hoping to host our dinners there. I still have much I’d like to know about you. You are my family, my child…and hardly the most difficult one I’ve ever dealt with,” he added with a smirk and a wink.

Brianna gulped down a sob.

“But…it’s so quick…are you sure?” she asked me, sounding so parental.

“I’ve been waiting a lifetime – your lifetime,” I added, bringing my hand up under her chin.

“I love him almost as much as I love you.”

Bree looked sullen, but not quite so pained or angry. It was clear that Brianna’s yo-yoing relationship with Jamie had gone from as close as it gets to the end of its string once more. It would, again, take time for her to warm to Jamie, and accept this new development in my relationship with him.

Jamie had gotten to know Bree’s expressions by now, and he made himself scarce for the night so I could talk to her, and answer any new questions that had cropped up in her mind.

“You’ve known for a while you were going to move in with him…why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Brianna somberly inquired, stretching her legs out to the coffee table.

I looked back from the chair across from her.

“I was afraid you’d react the way you did, and I didn’t want to upset you, or give you any reason to be angry with Jamie. I’ve seen how hard you both have been working on having a relationship, and I didn’t want to be the cause of a rift.”

“So you were gonna sneak off and not tell me?”

“Of course not, but I was considering not telling you until we were already moved in together.”

I looked at her expression out of the corner of my eye. It hadn’t changed yet.
“What would that change?” she questioned.

“Well, I’ve found it’s easier to apologize than to get permission…If we were already moved in, it would be much bigger a deal to ask me to move out.”

“I guess.”

“Goodnight, Bree.”

I stood and cradled her cheek when I reached her.

“Are we alright?”

“Working on it,” she replied.

~~~~~

I heard a gentle knock on my bedroom door followed by Brianna’s voice.

“Mom? Can I sleep with you tonight?” she asked through the small crack she had opened the door.

I was surprised, but pleased in a way. My little girl still had some little girl left.

“Of course, sweetie.”

Bree tip-toed in and scrambled up the bed on her knees, quickly tucking herself in. She settled on her back and crossed her hands on her stomach. I was shoulder tip to shoulder tip with her, almost afraid to move.

“You really love him?” she asked, still staring straight up at the ceiling.

“Jamie? Very much so.”

“I’m glad.”

“You are?” I hopefully replied.

“Yeah…I know you put your life on hold for me.”

“That’s not entirely true, Bree. I live for you, and it’s been enough all these years.”

“But you changed – the moment he came back into your life, you changed.”

I didn’t know what to say. My daughter was right. Jamie being back let me remember our life together without it hurting so much. And the opportunity to know what Jamie has seen and done over centuries of living – I could forgive him anything so long as he was by my side again.

“I think it’s good that he’s come back to you, mom. I always thought you led a boring life, that you had no skeletons in your closet, but I’m learning so much about you because of Jamie. I’m not sure how I feel about you living with him, though. I guess if he’d been here all along, it would be normal.”

I reached a hand out and coaxed one of her nearly Jamie-sized hands into mine.

“I don’t think ‘normal’ applies to any part of my life,” I divulged.

“Probably not,” Brianna puffed.
“I know you told me a lot of things when he first came back, but some of it I’m just remembering…Did you say…”

“What?” I prompted as she paused for what seemed a long time.

“You were married when you met Jamie?”

“I was, and I would have said happily so at the time. I was torn for a long time, and tried to get back to him. Jamie was even willing to let me go and return to my former life.”

“Jamie knew?” I heard her turn her head and look toward me in the darkness. A T train click-clacked past the window.

“I had to tell him. I was amazed at how he reacted to the truth of how I came to be with him. He was so understanding even though most of what I told him was unbelievable. And despite how deeply he was in love with me, he was willing to live without me if that was what I chose.”

By now, tears were streaming down my cheeks and Bree could hear in my voice that I was crying. She squeezed my hand tighter, but was at a loss for words that would comfort me.

“But, faced with the choice, I couldn’t leave him. There was this…connection, deeper than anything I had experienced before – deeper than everything other than having you.”

“But, you did leave him,” Bree remarked.

“I no longer had a choice. Jamie thought his death was imminent. I was willing to stay and die with him, but Jamie is so damn observant…he’d…figured out I was pregnant. If it had just been the two of us, nothing would have been able to part us, but he wanted you to live, and he risked his life to get us to a place where that could happen.”

“So, you were…going back to your original husband?” she asked, sounding a might confused.

“Jamie thought it was the safest place for me, for us. I often wonder what would have happened in that timeline; how would my life have been different. You would have been a baby-boomer, born in the years following the war, and I really don’t know what I would have been – housewife…doesn’t sound like me.”

“Oh, come on, Mom, you would have been a doctor no matter what, no matter how unconventional or difficult it was.”

I smiled and laughed as I turned to look toward her in the darkness.

“You’re probably right…if Frank had let me.”

Brianna sucked in a breath of surprise.

“Don’t sound so shocked – women were still expected to ‘obey’ their husbands then.”

“You make it sound like he was less open minded than what you faced in the 1700’s.”

“In some ways, he was. Jamie has always been a progressive thinker, and he nearly always treated me with respect - perhaps something to do with our initial encounter.”

“Do tell, Mom.”

“I did, Bree, but I guess that piece of the story eluded you. Within minutes of being in the same
room with him, I was popping his dislocated shoulder back into joint, and facing down a room of armed highlanders to do it.”

“You should write a book, I swear, but please, don’t try to sell it as non-fiction!”

I shoved Brianna playfully, and we laughed together. I held her arm in mine, and leaned my head against her shoulder.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve done this,” I commented.

“I know. I guess I thought I was too old to need ‘my mommy’.”

“I hope you’ll never be too old. I love being your mommy.”

“I love you too…and I’m gonna miss having you so close, even if you drive me nuts sometimes…most of the time,” Bree corrected.

We nestled in the darkness, speaking no more. But I felt a little less torn about leaving Brianna.

~~~~~
Moving Out and Moving On

Chapter Notes

Sorry to leave you all hanging for so long, but between shoveling snow and losing my beloved Marmalade, it's taken some time to get to a place where I wanted to write, and even longer for me to write something that was good enough to share. Hope this'll do.

Moving Out and Moving On

My last suitcase of things I’d brought to Bree’s apartment for the summer sat just inside the door. I saw her cast a mournful glance at the case as she walked by it. She’d stayed in the common room since she was dressed for the day, making sure I didn’t disappear while she wasn’t looking. It was a clear case of role reversal from when I sent her off to college. She switched between nervously pacing and sitting alertly. She had just sat down again when Jamie knocked. I saw her features tighten, but I raised my hand to her to keep seated for now.

I opened the door and was whisked off my feet as Jamie wrapped me up and spun me around. He kissed me over and over, his face glowing with excitement.

“God, I’ve waited so long for this,” he growled as he placed me back on my feet and spotted Brianna sitting on the tall counter. He toned down his energy level, but kept smiling at me in a way that was making my heart thump in my chest. Bree slipped to her feet and approached where we were standing. I got the impression she needed to talk to Jamie…alone.

“I’m going to check the room one more time,” I announced, and left them together.

It was quiet for some time, but I was trying very hard not to eavesdrop, so I may have missed the beginning of what was said.

“So,” Brianna opened with.

“Aye, lass,” he returned with a bob of his head.

“Mom and I talked last night…I’m sorry about how I reacted…I…I thought the worst of you.”

Jamie pulled one cheek up into a sheepish smile, his eyes blinking a couple of times.

“You don’t know me verra well, so I understand where you’re coming from, but I hope to earn your trust.”

Jamie reached out his hands for her to grasp, but instead she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and whispered, “Take good care of mom.”

“You have my word,” he promised, his arms slowly coming around her back. He melted for a moment in her embrace, but felt her spine stiffen as she pulled away, feeling uncomfortable in his arms.

“You can come out now, mom,” Brianna stated, looking at Jamie as she did.
They smiled at each other, both knowing I was not beyond listening distance, and certainly not above listening in.

“Be good,” she advised, kissing me on the forehead.

“I’m never far away,” I reminded her.

“I know,” she croaked.

“Now go before I start to cry.”

“I think we may be too late for that.”

Brianna laughed in the midst of her tears, dabbing at them, smiling despite how sad I knew she must be feeling.

~~~~~

It seemed like days ago I left Brianna’s apartment, but it was just this morning. Jamie came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. I melted and sighed.

“Holding up?” he asked.

“Barely.”

Jamie backed up to a corner of the bed and pulled me down to sit on the tip of it while his arms and legs enveloped me. He was so warm. I almost began to cry as he warmed me, like I was melting.

“You miss her,” he surmised.

“And it’s only been a few hours, really, hasn’t it?”

“Give her a call, Sassenach. You can say goodnight to the lass, at least…unless you think it would upset her.”

I smiled, actually, I beamed at Jamie for the suggestion of what had been on my mind since it started getting dark out. I fished the phone out of my pocket and hit the speed dial, breathing deeply while I waited for Bree to answer. I heard the click-over that meant voicemail was about to pick up and my head dropped.

“Bree, sorry I didn’t catch you…I just wanted to say goodnight - ”

Jamie took the phone from me.

“And, lass, as promised, I’m taking good care of your mom. Good night to ye.”

“See you soon, sweetie,” I offered encouragingly.

“I guess she’s not sitting around worrying about me…Good - it’s good that she didn’t answer. She’s out having fun – back to being an adult now that ‘mom’ isn’t underfoot.”

Even Jamie could tell I was trying to convince myself that Brianna wasn’t suffering the pangs of separation the way I was. He rubbed his hands up and down my upper arms.

“Aye,” he reassured me. “She’s a young lady with lots of options.”
I nodded several times.

~~~~~

Brianna placed her phone on the counter after seeing it was her mother calling, but she wasn’t ready to talk just now. Two of her roomies had arrived to move back in, each bringing assorted take-out, and Bree’s phone now sat between boxes and bags of the left-over offerings.

“Not talking to your mom?” one of the other girls asked. “Did you guys have a fight, or something? I told you living with your mom would drive ya nuts.”

“No…no fight…it was kinda hard…letting go again…”

“Now whose voice was that?” she interrupted, hearing Jamie.

“It’s… my father,” Brianna informed her.

“Your father? I thought you said your father was dead?”

“He got better,” Brianna deadpanned, leaving the room without further comment, the confused face of one roommate following her across the room.

“What - ?”

~~~~~

I couldn’t relax. Maybe Brianna was right – it’s all been so fast, but being with Jamie would never be a mistake. Maybe we were both trying too hard to relax. Jamie had made me tea, and rubbed my shoulders. I just found myself pacing around this lavish bedroom in Griff’s house.

“Perhaps we should just…go to bed?” Jamie offered.

I smirked and blushed, remembering the first time we’d been faced with that choice.

“I’m afraid it will be to sleep,” I informed him, reaching a hand out to him.

“Aye, I figured as much,” he sighed, clasping my hand with one of his and cradling my chin with the other.

Jamie gave me a soft kiss on the tip of the nose and another quick peck on the lips.

“I won’t be a moment,” I soothed, heading off to the bathroom.

Jamie seemed to be standing in the exact position I had left him when I returned, me now wearing an over-sized t-shirt in which to sleep.

I saw Jamie smile and heard a low ‘hrumph’ emit from his throat.

“Something on your mind?” I quizzed, draping the day’s clothes over a chair in the corner and placing my shoes beneath.

“Just an observation – you get dressed for bed…I undress for bed.”

I smiled in appreciation of his observation, coming to stand right in front of him again.

“May I help you with that?” I offered, tentatively tracing my finger down Jamie’s chest.
“Still only interested in sleeping?” Jamie questioned with a solicitous smirk.

“Afraid so,” I answered, and turned, heading toward the bed.

Before I had even sat down on the mattress, Jamie was waiting for me under the covers, having denuded himself. The warmness of his skin, and his encompassing embrace were soothing.

“God, I love you,” I mumbled, feeling his smile as it shifted his cheek against mine. He nestled in at the back of my neck, and tangled me tightly in his limbs. Feeling safe and secure in Jamie’s hold on me, I drifted to sleep in moments, the white noise of Jamie’s breathing filtering out all other sounds.

~~~~~

“Good morning, Sassenach,” Jamie purred in my ear.

For a moment I was not only unsure where I was, but when I was as well. I was amazed at how easily my brain could be fooled into thinking the last twenty years had been a dream, and that I had never left Jamie’s embrace, or the eighteenth century.

“Do you have plans for the day?” he asked, arms pulling me in tight, as if to prevent my escape, or at the least change my mind about getting out of bed.

“Nothing concrete – did you have something in mind?” I answered, stroking my hands down Jamie’s forearms until I was holding his wrists.

A deep hum came from his throat.

“I know that sound.”

“I’m sure you do, Sassenach,” he laughed. “Ye’ve heard me make it enough times.”

“It would take very little to entice me to agree today.”

I cast a come-hither glance over my shoulder, smiling coquettishly. It was nearly sunset before we crawled out of the bed, both absolutely starving, but otherwise quite happy with how we’d spent the day.

We kissed our way to the kitchen, Jamie seating me on the counter next to the fridge while he collected the items needed for our evening ‘breakfast’. It felt like a dream, the kind you don’t want to wake from because there’s no way reality could be this good.

“It’s real, Claire,” he announced with a bob of his head.

I gulped, taken back by his apparent mind-reading, and traced his face with my hands.

~~~~~

Over the next week we completely settled into Griff’s house. It took some time to sort out our belongings, mine more than Jamie’s simply because I had accumulated more items over twenty years than Jamie had managed to collect in over two centuries! But Jamie had never truly settled down, and quite often lost all he owned when he began a new life each time. However, I was quite fascinated with the items Griff held in trust for Jamie. It was a time capsule of Jamie’s lives.

But what grew to interest me were the items in Jamie’s wardrobe.
“Could you explain to me, how it is that you have two full draws brimming with socks, but own not a single pair of underwear?”

Jamie smirked, then laughed, and I detected a slight blush on his cheeks.

“I’ve…never found a need for them.”

“Never?” I questioned.

Jamie came up behind me, wrapped his arms around my waist and leaned in.

“I havna heard ye complaining about the ready access to my body, Sassenach, so I’ll assume it’s a sense of morality and modern scruples that have ye concerned for my soul.”

“I was just curious,” I responded, “I don’t expect you to go to hell on account of a lack of Y-fronts.”

~~~~~

I saw Jamie staring intently at me when I looked up into the mirror, and I smiled shyly. I actually got a shiver from seeing the hunger in his eyes. He was stretched out the length of the bed, his head at the bed’s foot, looking like an alligator about to slither into the river to devour me as his prey.

“You know I can’t come back to bed this morning,” I cautioned.

“I know,” he replied, crossing his arms in front of him and setting his chin where his wrists crossed, “but it is almost as enjoyable to watch you get dressed as it is to help you get undressed, Sassenach.”

He’d already watched me wriggle into a sports bra and pull on a pair of leggings – something I never considered a spectator sport, but that had apparently provided Jamie with a high level of entertainment.

I finished dressing and left for my meeting at the hospital. My leave of absence was at an end, as were my endless days of lounging in Jamie’s arms any time we wished, but I had not thought in my wildest dreams to have him back just as I was starting to let go of Brianna, and I was not ready to stop working, just as I was sure Jamie would not be content if he were unemployed. Being caretaker to Griff’s house gave Jamie many day-to-day duties and a sense of purpose, and I hoped that would be enough to occupy his time while I was at work at the hospital.

~~~~~

Still laying stretched out, Jamie listened for the front door to thunk closed as Claire left for the day. As soon as the sound hit his attuned ears, he sprang from the bed, dressed, and headed down to the lower level to begin work on a special project, hoping Claire would value and treasure what he sought to accomplish.

~~~~~
“I’m home,” Claire called out upon entering the front hall.

“I’ll be right there,” echoed back to her from some distance.

Jamie strode out of the old kitchen, pulled the door shut, and turned the key in the fully mortised lock, dropping the former into his pocket. His face lit up, and he charged up to greet Claire, having missed her all day.

“And what have you been up to?” Claire questioned, patting dust off his shirt.

“Och, nothing,” he said with a blush and a slight shake of his head, “just poking about.”

“Poking about? I wouldn’t think any part of this house had dust like this,” she retorted looking at her soiled hand.

Jamie grabbed her up and kissed her, hoping to change the subject.

“God, I’ve missed ye.”

“I’m all yours for the rest of the day,” Claire replied, happily letting Jamie hold on to her and ply her with kisses.

~ ~ ~

It was now the last week of August. Claire had been going into the hospital three days a week, getting up to speed on her upcoming cases, and Jamie had been carefully waiting her out each morning before heading downstairs to work on his surprise for her. This day she’d thrown him a curveball, not leaving the house despite him knowing she was scheduled to have a meeting today.

“I thought…”

“You thought I had a meeting,” she echoed, taking Jamie by the shoulders and smiling.

“Well, I do, but not until later…What are you up to?” she inquired, seeing his desire to escape her direct gaze.

Carefully avoiding direct eye contact, a smile danced about his lips, never fully landing.

“It’s a surprise…and it’s not ready…Can you leave it at that for now?”

“Alright – for now, and it is keeping you busy. When can I expect you to spring this surprise on me?”

“Soon,” was all he said.

~ ~ ~

Brianna kept referencing her phone, following the map on the screen. She looked tentative and nervous as she approached a door and was about to knock. The door opened, and both Brianna and Claire jumped back from their side of the door.
“My God, you scared the life out of me,” Claire said quickly in a single breath.

“I wasn’t expecting…but it is good to see you.”

“I brought supper, I thought we could eat – “

“I’d love to, but I have a meeting, and I’m already running late. But Jamie’s home. He’s missed seeing you.”

Claire managed to get Brianna into the house.

“I should only be an hour or so,” Claire said, hand clasping Brianna’s shoulder. “I think he’s in the back garden.”

She pointed Bree in the right direction, smiled and nodded at her reluctant daughter, and slipped away to her meeting.

Finding herself alone in an unfamiliar house, Brianna tried to get a feel for the place. She looked up and around the front hall. She felt like she had fallen into a museum or palace, but did her best to move along in the direction Claire had pointed her in. When she reached the modern kitchen, she put the bags of takeout on the counter. She turned all the way around, taking in the room, and finally spying movement out of the corner of her eyes, made her way to the open French doors the led onto the patio and out to the garden.

Jamie was focused on a vaguely human shaped target pinned to a bale of hay some distance away. He held a small dagger in his hand. Brianna ambled onto the patio just as Jamie sent the dagger sailing toward its target, sure of a good body blow, and smiled at the faint footsteps he’d detected moments before.

“Couldn’t resist one more goodbye, Sassenach?” he teased, thinking full well Claire had sought him out before leaving for her meeting. He turned, the look of utter surprise overtaking his face.

Bree smiled as the look of surprise on Jamie’s face bubbled into an overjoyed smile and he took the few steps necessary to be standing right in front of his daughter. He hesitated a bit, but they accomplished an awkward hug. Jamie wanted so much to grab her again and give her the most powerful bear hug.

Brianna’s focus had shifted – to Jamie’s feet. His long, slender, bare feet. Jamie looked to his feet, then back to Brianna’s intense visage, then back to his feet yet again.

“Something wrong with my feet?” Jamie finally voiced.

“Hmm?” Bree hummed, bringing her eyes up.

“My feet – is there a reason you find them…of such interest?”

“I just…do you have trouble finding shoes that fit?”

She then eyed her own feet, and pushed the slip-on sneaker off her right foot and placed her foot right next to his. There was a remarkable likeness between Bree’s feet and Jamie’s. There was a silent moment as the pair of them slowly looked up from their feet to make tentative eye contact. Each raised an eyebrow, mimicking each other’s expression. A slowly building smiled led way to trying not to laugh, each pressing their lips shut to hold the puffs and short snorts at bay. Each finally gave way and laughed out loud.
“Good lord, lass, of all the things I might wish you to inherit!”

～～～

“What were you doing there?” Brianna asked, pointing toward the target.

“Och, just keeping my aim sharp,” he uttered, blushing and looking up and down from her face to his feet over and over, almost not knowing what to do with his joy at seeing her again.

“If I had my bow, I’d give you a run for your money.”

Jamie raised a finger, indicating for her to wait, and he dashed off to the house. With his long strides it took little time for his return.

“There ye go,” he offered, handing a basic bow to Bree.

“It’s a little primitive.”

“If ye need one of those all tarted up bows, there’s a couple of ‘em inside.”

A challenge if ever Brianna had heard one.

“This’ll do,” she retorted.

Sure and smooth the first arrow slipped free and before it had a chance to travel to its target, she had loosed two more – striking the heart, the eye, and the nether regions of the human – ish form. Bree smiled wickedly as she watched Jamie react to the third hit, drawing his legs together as if feeling the target’s pain. But he started to nod, slowly at first, and then more quickly and with an equally wicked smile to Bree’s.

“I’m lucky you were unarmed when first we met.”

“Damn right,” she threw right back.

“Gah,” he vocalized.

“What?”

“You reminded me so much of Claire just there.”

Both now completely unshod, Jamie and Brianna stood side by side as he instructed her before her next attempt at sinking the blade of his dagger into the distant target. Bree’s shoulders tensed a bit when Jamie realigned her stance by shifting her hips with his hands, but it was gone in a flash, and all but forgotten when her throw stuck solidly into the bale behind the target.

“Verra good,” Jamie exhaled with a smile.

When Jamie found that Brianna had reached the same level of accuracy in her throws as he was displaying himself, he felt the lesson was complete.

“Oh, lass, I think we best stop before you show me up any worse,” He commented, climbing the slight incline and seating himself on the bluestone topped wall at the edge of the patio.

She smiled and followed him up, sitting on the facing end of the wall. They smiled at each other, each trying to think of what to say, both hoping and wanting for there to be some instant conduit for a relationship.
“So, what brought you over?” Jamie asked, knowing Bree and Claire had been playing ‘phone tag’ since her message the day they moved into Griff’s house.

“Actually…I brought dinner…I…I know I’ve been a little distant…”

“Aye.”

“I have been calling…leaving messages.”

“You’ve been calling your mam when you know she won’t be available,” Jamie softly stated.

“I…needed time to think…it’s been a lot to take in.”

“It’s been a lot for me as well, finding out for sure Claire had my child, loving you the moment I set eyes on you…and wishing I could have found the two of you sooner…What I wouldna give to have been here…to raise you. I am so verra proud…to have you for a child.”

Jamie reached out his hand and was glad to find Brianna reached back to him. A sheepish smile came up on her face.

“I doubt either one of us could successfully deny familial association…but it’s going to take me a while to get used to having a dad.”

“Aye, I know, but I’ll be here.”

Bree nodded and Jamie smiled.

Over the next hour, their conversation progressed. Claire arrived home, and not finding Jamie or Brianna in the kitchen, but seeing the food bags on the counter, hoped that Jamie’s dagger throwing hadn’t turned into a blood sport with his own daughter. She tread lightly toward the patio doors, but stopped short when she heard laughter – coming from both of them. Claire peeked carefully, hoping not to be seen. They were engaged in an animated conversation, both appearing quite happy. It was then Claire realized Brianna was wearing a pair of cargo shorts that were nearly identical in style and color to the ones Jamie had on today. She was sure they had not realized how similarly they were dressed. A feeling of warmth rose through Claire’s chest, and she retreated before she managed to put a damper on this moment between them.

When Jamie and Brianna brought their conversation indoors, Claire came out of hiding, hearing just the tail end of their discussion. Brianna smiled and went over to Claire for a hug.

“Mom,” she greeted, “Jamie’s invited me to come over to watch some historical movies so he can point out where they got it wrong.”

“Sounds like fun,” she replied dispassionately.

“Such excitement from you,” Brianna issued, continuing to the counter where she had left their dinner.

“It’s not your mam’s cup o’ tea, talkin’ ‘bout the past – she was always more into changin’ the future,” Jamie professed, fishy grin overtaking his face, his eyes finding Claire’s across the room.

“You still haven’t eaten?” Claire asked.

“No yet, Sassenach. What’d ye bring, lass?”

As she unfurled the tops of the bags emblazoned with golden arches, Jamie laughed lightly.
“You know, I was verra disappointed to find that McDonald’s was not a Scottish restaurant – despite the ancient dispute between our families.”

Bree smiled at Jamie and rolled her eyes, acknowledging his statement.

“It must be cold by now,” Claire said of the food, Jamie’s joking comment ignored.

“We can nuke it,” Bree off-handedly related.

~~~~~

Jamie was sitting in the middle of the bed, his thoughts a million miles away, but by the smile on his lips, I was pretty sure he was thinking about this evening with Brianna. I sat at my dressing table watching thoughts flicker through his mind, not wanting to disturb him, but unable to look away. He felt my eyes on him and drew his lips in, blushing and readjusting his focus on me.

“You really got along well with Bree tonight. You have no idea how happy that makes me,” I told him.

“Aye…she’s…quite something – such a quick study. I’ve never seen anyone take to throwing a dagger like that,” he excitedly blurted.

I made my way over and knelt on the bed, wrapping my arms around his neck from behind.

“She’s your daughter, I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“Aye,” he spoke, but seemed a bit detached, already back in his mind.

“But something’s bothering you.”

Jamie nodded, a contemplative expression masking his face.

“Is…she…always so uncomfortable to be held? I mean, she hugs you…and seems to enjoy it, and I know we’ve not known each other long…but it is as if she’s afraid to let herself…relax when I hold her.”

I slid back from holding Jamie and pulled my knees up as I felt my stomach turn as a memory surged to the surface. Jamie turned and wrapped his arms around my knees, coming almost nose to nose with me.

“Something happened to the lass, didn’t it?”

Jamie pried my fingers loose and held my hands tightly. I looked at his hands as his fingers caressed mine, his thumb over-stroking my knuckles softly.

“When Brianna was sixteen, she spent the summer with her best friend and their family at their beach house on the Cape. I knew both parents, they’re doctors I’d worked with for many years. That’s how Bree became friends with their daughter. They were in the same class, and both spent a lot of hours waiting around the hospital for their parents to be able to come home. So, when Bree begged me, I saw no reason why it wouldn’t be a fun way for her to spend the summer.”

I stopped and took a deep breath, Jamie continuing to rub my hands in support.

“She’s always been strong willed, but never in a bad way. Even though she was a teen, I trusted her. She wasn’t boy-crazy, and we’d talked about sex, much to her embarrassment, so I felt quite secure in letting her go. She’s a good girl – not one to be talked into doing something she’d regret.
For most of the summer, everything was fine. Her friend’s younger brother was being a pest – hitting on her and stuff like that, but Bree handled herself just fine.”

My mouth scrunched in, and anger welled up in me. Jamie squeezed my hands extra tight, holding them in place, holding me in place.

“Three days before Bree was supposed to come home, they dropped her off at the end of our driveway. They didn’t know if anyone was home, they didn’t call me, or anything. I heard this loud sound in the front hall. I thought a tree had come in through the window or something, but it was just Bree dropping all her things and falling to her knees. Her eyes were glassy, and I could tell she’d been crying. She grabbed me around the waist, almost knocking me over, and all she said, over and over again was, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry’. It took me more than a day to get the story out of her.”

I couldn’t even look Jamie in the eyes for the moment. The building empathy and anger I knew I would see would put an end to me relaying this life-changing moment not only in Brianna’s life, but in mine as well. My breathing had become fast and shallow, and I was amazed at how all the feelings from that day were rearing their ugly heads as if it was happening all over again.

“Her friend’s brother – Lucius – who unbeknownst to me was called ‘Lucifer’ by his friends – and his parents – that bastard…he drugged Bree, and then he…he…he raped her. His parents walked in on the attack, but it was too late…and then they had the audacity to blame Brianna for what had just happened. They knew what kind of person their son was – apparently Bree was not the first girl he’d done that to.”

I gathered the strength to look into Jamie’s eyes.

“She doesn’t remember all of it, but for weeks, months after…she’d jump if I touched her. She stopped being comfortable in her own skin. She had a sense memory of him touching her, and nightmares. I hated myself for not keeping her out of harm’s way.”

“It was not your fault, nor the lass’s – If only I had found you sooner, Sassenach.”

I shook my head.

“You couldn’t have stopped this from happening, either, Jamie.”

“But I could have done something after,” he affirmed, gaze narrowing and mouth drawing tight.

I aimed a pained smile at Jamie.

“No…I went down that road.”

I was shaking my head.

“It made me feel better, but it only deepened Bree’s guilt. She thought I was disappointed in her, when nothing could have been farther from the truth.”

I was rapidly degenerating into tears.

“Mo nighean donn,” resonated into my ear as Jamie endeavored to hug the hurt out of me. One arm had me deftly pinned to his chest while his free hand brushed through my hair.

“I know you did everything she needed of you, or she would do more now than flinch at the unexpected or non-initiated touch. She’s a strong one, our lass. I still wish I could have found you
sooner, so she’d know no real man would treat her so.

~~~~~

In the pre-dawn hours, I found myself awake. I took a deep breath. Thoughts of Bree’s attack were strangling the sleep out of me. Jamie squeezed me, confirming he, too, was awake.

“Don’t tell Brianna that you know. I don’t know how often she thinks about it,” I said with the shake of my head, “and I hope she thinks of it less and less as the years go by, but I think the thought that you know her darkest day would make her close down just as she’s starting to open up to you.”


~~~~~
Brianna and Jamie sat lounging on the couches of the media room. Jamie had been happily pointing out the inaccuracies in the historical and biopic films they had pulled from Griff’s collection, but now they just sat. Each sighed, and hearing each other, smiled at finding another shared trait.

“So…” Jamie broke the silence with.

“I enjoyed today,” Brianna told him, “thank-you.”

“Och, no thanks needed. It was my pleasure.”

“Well, thank-you anyway. It was nice to…unwind after my first week of classes.”

Jamie smiled proudly.

“I didna realize…I canna believe I didna ask before – what are ye studying?”

“Architecture.”

Jamie sat up tall, and Brianna did the same seeing his sudden alertness.

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s challenging at times, but I love it.”

“There’s something I’d like you to take a look at, if you would,” Jamie excitedly requested. “Stay right there – I’ll be back.”

He sprang to his feet and headed to the old kitchen unlocking it and fetching his plans from the make-shift drawing table. He relocked the door and checked that the door was secure before hurrying back next door. He took the scrolled up plans and unfurled them across the coffee table.

Brianna sat forward and studied the plans.

“What’s this for?” she asked.

“The room next door – I’m trying to restore it to how it would have looked at the time the house was built. It bears a striking resemblance to a room your mother and I shared at Leoch, our first apartment, if you will. It’s a mirror image, of course, but I saw the similarities, and I wanted to do this for her.”

Bree continued to pour over the details on the page.

“You drew this?” she happily inquired.

“Aye.”

“This is good – not just the drawing,” she said, raising her eyes up and smiling at Jamie. “What you’re trying to do here – it’s…beautiful.”
Jamie, reacting to something Brianna didn’t hear, quickly snatched the plans out of her hands, rolled it, and shoved it between the cushions of the couch. He sat and turned his suddenly masked face toward the book shelves at the back of the room.

Now hearing footsteps, Brianna mirrored his pseudo-relaxed posture and tried to make her face appear neutral just as Claire appeared behind them.

“Done with the film festival?” she asked coming down the side ramp.

Jamie moved over, sitting in front of the rolled plans in the couch, and patted where he had been seated to direct Claire where to land next to him. Jamie leaned over and kissed her demurely.

“We just finished,” he detailed, then looked at Brianna with a warning gaze and barely detectable shake of his head.

“Yeah,” Bree responded, “Jamie’s pointed out so many things I never would have thought to challenge.”

“I always find it amazing what things the writers and producers of movies and TV programs will change just to make something more exciting,” Claire interjected, “History be damned,” she added with a jaunty tilt of her head.

“Aye,” Jamie concurred, placing his hand on her knee.

Brianna looked down, but she found herself smiling, and looked back up enough for both Claire and Jamie to see her approving expression.

“So…is there a round two for your viewing, or would you like to take a dinner break?” Claire inquired.

Bree looked questioningly to Jamie with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Hungry?” he asked. Bree nodded.

“Why don’t the pair of you head up and decide what we’ll have, I’ll tidy up, put the films back and such,” Jamie offered, raising an eyebrow in Brianna’s direction.

“Oh, yeah, Mom, this new place just opened – all slow roasted stuff, hand-made home-style. One of my roomies brought it home the other night – the apartment smelled like Thanksgiving dinner.”

Bree wrapped an arm around her mother’s back and began walking her up the ramp. She flashed a triumphant grin over her shoulder at Jamie, getting a nod in return. He laughed lightly once he was alone. That girl understood every subtle signal he’d given her. He retrieved the plans, slightly squashed, from below the cushions, and saw them safely back into the locked old kitchen before he rejoined his girls for a meal.

~~~~~~

Jamie, seated on a park bench just beyond the stairs that lead into Brianna’s apartment, was waiting for her to come home. He hadn’t had the opportunity to explain his secrecy about the special room he was renovating in the old kitchen of Griff’s house. Jamie didn’t want to risk leaving a message in case it somehow fell into Claire’s hands. His plan was too important to him, but after seeing Brianna’s initial reaction to his drawings, he knew he wanted her to be involved.

“Jamie?” he heard Bree’s voice inquire.
She lowered her dark glasses down to the end of her nose.

“What are you doing here?”

Jamie got to his feet, head slightly lowered and fingers in his jeans pockets. For a moment, a spike of trepidation pierced his heart.

“Is something wrong?” Brianna continued, her heart skipping a beat.

“No, no,” he diffused, his hands caressing the air as he stepped up to her.

“I…” he smiled shyly, the sun making his eyes match the chambray shirt he was wearing, “I’d like you to help me with the room for Claire…if ye the time…and the want to help me.”

“You could have called.”

“Ah…well…I didna want your mother to catch me – she’s already quite curious as to what I’m up to. Long ago I promised her that we might have secrets, but no lies between us, and I couldna think what to tell her should she catch me.”

Brianna laughed at his sheepish grin.

“Come up then…we’ll talk – get everything figured out so you can still surprise mom without breaking your promise.”

They walked side by side, stride for stride, up to the fourth floor. Jamie hesitated at the threshold, not having been in this apartment since Claire moved out.

“With your knowledge of architecture, I thought maybe you could help me get all the details right,” he said to still the nerves that had grown as they climbed.

“I’d like that,” she replied.

“So…I’m assuming there’s a special occasion you want this room ready for…”

“Ah…it’ll be the anniversary of the day we met…many, many years ago – she saved my life that day…and then she stole my heart.”

His smile spoke volumes he didn’t need to say, and it made Brianna smile in return.

“Mom really knocked your socks off, didn’t she?”

Jamie laughed as he nodded.

“That’s one way to put it.”

Jamie let out a sigh as he remembered the first time he had Claire in his arms.

“She was hurtin’, but still brave as could be. She’d tended me, my wounds, three times before her situation got the better of her…She let me comfort her.”

“So it’s…a really important date to commemorate,” Brianna stated.

“Aye. Without it, there’d be no other dates to celebrate.”

Jamie reached out and held Brianna’s chin.
“Nor would I have you.”

Jamie and Brianna hashed out a schedule of when she would come to the house, making sure they were done with the day’s work in the old kitchen and happily ensconced in the media room before Claire was anywhere near the house. Bree pointed out certain legalities – the need to have the chimney cleaned and inspected for one.

Jamie didn’t have the plans with him, so much of what they went over were style details and aesthetic choices. Brianna brought out several books she had to see if she could find a picture that would give them a reference, and maybe even provide simple plans for building an appropriate bedstead for the room. They stood shoulder to shoulder pouring over pictures and diagrams in Bree’s books, and later employing her laptop for further research.

At one point, Jamie found himself just watching Brianna. She caught him looking longingly at her and raised an eyebrow in his direction.

“Sorry,” he faltered, “Sometimes I canna help myself…I wondered for so long if you even existed.”

He looked down slowly nodding. Bree took his hand in hers.

“I wondered if you existed, too.”

Her words made Jamie smile and brought a tear to his eye. He wiped it away with his free hand and sighed yet again.

“Well…it’s getting late. I suppose I should be getting back before I arouse any suspicions. Is there anything you need?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

They walked to the door swinging their joined hands to and fro.

“Mom and I used to do that when I was little. She made it into a game so I wouldn’t pull away.”

The pair just stood face to face for a time.

“Like I said the other day,” Brianna ventured, “It’ll take me some time to get used to having a dad.”

“Och, I know.”

Brianna pulled the door open, and Jamie stepped aside as two of her roomies walked between them from the landing to the common room. Bree and Jamie nodded goodbye and he headed off down the stairs.

“OMG, who was that?” roomie one asked.

“Are you dating him?” asked roomie two.

“No,” Brianna scowled.

“Can you set me up with him, then?” roomie two smarmily burbled.
“NO!”

“Why not?”

“Because my mom would kill you.”

“Is he your brother?” roomie one wanted to know.

“He’s my father – God, you guys!”

“That’s your father?” both roomies shouted, each grabbing one of Bree’s arms.

“Yeah, what of it?” she tersely growled.

“I wouldn’t mind calling him daddy,” roomie one drawled sexily.

“Eww,” Brianna countered, “You guys are sick.”

~~~~~

Between classes and other commitments, Bree was only going to be able to help Jamie with the room one or two days a week, but that didn’t matter to Jamie. Any amount of time spent with his newly found daughter was golden to him.

When she arrived this time, Bree found Jamie out front of Griff’s house, waiting for her to arrive. She was actually taken aback as it seemed a piece of statuary had come to life, but it was merely Jamie rising from a ‘thinker’-ish position by the stairs.

“Oh, God,” Brianna yelled out, placing her hand on her chest, jumping slightly.

Jamie wrapped his hand around Bree’s other wrist, trying to steady her.

“Are ye alright?” he breathily asked, unsure why Brianna had called out.

Bree shook her head and shook off the fear that had suddenly enveloped her thinking the inanimate had come alive.

“You scared me…I thought…” she stopped to take a breath, “I only saw you out of the corner of my eye, and I had been looking at the statues, and I thought…I thought one of them had come alive.”

“Sorry, lass, didna mean to give you such a start…Your mam will be at the hospital until dinner time.”

“Good. That means we have a few hours. We should be able to make a good start of things today. I brought an old shirt to throw on as a cover-up so mom doesn’t wonder how I got dirty watching DVDs,” she informed Jamie as she slipped the small backpack off her shoulder.

“Good idea – that’s what gave me away to your mam – she found me all dusty, and wanted to know what I’d been up to. If she finds you dusty as well, our goose’ll be cooked.”

Jamie carefully put an open palm to the back of Brianna’s shoulder as they climbed the stairs into Griff’s house. For a moment she rested her head on his shoulder. When they reached the door, Jamie pushed it open, and Bree righted her head as she crossed the threshold.

They both felt adrenalinized as they walked through the house to the target room, their secret mission about to begin.
“So here it is,” Jamie declared as he unlocked the old kitchen and let Brianna enter the room before him.

Bree looked around. She smiled at the huge fireplace and hearth, looked at the construction of the walls and how it was all supported. She noticed the one head-high window that let the only ambient light into the room. Jamie was taking deep breaths as he watched her first foray into his project room, waiting for her reaction.

“It’s gonna take a lot of work,” Bree commented, “But it’ll be worth it,” she enthusiastically affirmed.

Brianna adorned herself in the cover shirt she’d brought and the pair got to work clearing out the room except for the make-shift drawing table Jamie had the plans laid across. To help the time pass as they worked, Jamie regaled her with tales of his life.

“So I had a feeling I was being followed, but to turn and confront an unknown foe without a secure backstop, well, that’s folly to be sure. And to just draw a sword in public…too many people could be hurt. So I made my way to a nearby shop, and as luck would have it, it was a charcuterie.”

“Charcuterie? What’s that?” Brianna asked as she swept a think bank of spider webs from between the overhead beams.

“They sell cured meats – sausages and such.”

“Why is that lucky?”

“Well, while I could not hold a sword at the ready and just walk the streets, no one would care if I had a sausage in my grasp – even one the size of a small baseball bat, and just as hard.”

Brianna broke out laughing.

“I’m beginning to get a picture in my head,” she said with a grin.

Jamie blushed, but grinned in kind.

“You fought people off with a sausage?”

“It made a fine weapon…and a quite delicious supper as well.”

Jamie cocked his head and shot a side-eyed glance at Brianna.

They both laughed until their stomachs and faces ached.

Once laughed out, they each took in a deep breath and sighed it back out.

“We best get tidied up and the room locked down. I’ve selected a few things for us to watch, and I’ve made a little something for us to snack on if you’re peckish.”

~~~~~

“So you don’t just eat take-out,” Bree commented as they made their way down to the media room. “I mean, every time we’ve eaten together…”

“I think your mam thought it was a safe and quick way for us to spend time together. The meal was ready and in front of us…and there were no knives…” he trailed off.
Bree smirked.

“I guess that was a smart choice…considering…I’m sorry…I was awful to you. All I could see was the life I knew imploding. I couldn’t see how much I might gain…I bake,” she started again, bringing the topic back to where it had started, “but you know that.”

“Aye…the brownies…I didna wish to meet you that way…I didna even know – but the first look at ye…I knew I had a hand in your creation.”

They took each other’s hand again and walked down the ramp into the depths of the media room.

“Needless to say, we were each a hell of a shock to one another.”

“That we can agree on,” Brianna countered with, “But now that the shock’s worn off…I’m glad you’re here. They say you can’t miss what you’ve never had, but it’s not true.”

Brianna gulped and pressed her eyes shut. Jamie longed to pull her in and hold her against his heart, but she was not ready. He sat and waited for her to control her emotions enough to join him on the couch.

~~~~~

“So things have been going well with Brianna? She keeps coming back – that’s a good sign isn’t it?”

“Aye, it is. But I still wish I could hug her, let her know by just putting my arms around her how much I love her.”

“Give it time.”

“I will…I can see a day where we might…well…she’s letting her guard down a bit – letting her emotions come to the surface.”

Jamie sat on the bed to unlace his boots, and once done, he sat and stared at the floor below him.

“She’s a much more emotional creature than I thought.”

I went over to him and took his face in my hands.

“She takes after you that way. She guards herself, her feelings…but just below the surface simmers a well of emotions that would overwhelm most people.”

Jamie slid his arms around my back.

“I hope she lets me see that side…I want to know my daughter as if I have always been a part of her life.”

“I want that, too. You could learn a lot from each other.”

~~~~~
On the days Brianna was unavailable, Jamie still made progress on the room, but it wasn’t as much fun alone. Bree had left Jamie a list of websites that might help him in recreating the environment of their Leoch room, but paint colors and fabric swatches were not really something he had ever paid much mind to, so after coming away from the computer with a headache after an exhaustive online search, he decided to wait for Brianna’s council before committing himself to a color scheme.

Jamie chose a day he knew Claire would be at work for a long span to call in the chimney expert. And that was a good thing, as it turned out. For as long as it took to make the repairs and upgrades to the chimney, it actually took a little bit longer to catch the flying squirrels that burst into the room when they were disturbed from their ensconced location. (A story Jamie very much looked forward to sharing with Brianna.)

To his surprise, Jamie found a lost hidden door alongside the fireplace. He surmised it had been over a hundred years since it had last been opened. In it he found most of the trappings needed to use the fireplace for cooking. While the arm to hold a pot above the coals was still intact, it had suffered the same fate as the chimney – the mortar had weakened, and even a small pot would likely make it give under the weight. He also found a cast iron pot that must have spent many a year hanging over the hearth, and assorted long-handled tools for the stirring and serving of food. He considered it an incredible coup. By the end of the day, not only was the chimney in perfect working order, but the pot hook was mended, and the hearth was ready for business.

He sketched out what he was looking for in a bed, taking the ceiling height and space available into consideration, and knew after very little research that he would not find anything that fit his specifications in an off the shelf application. He knew he had the skills to make what he wanted, but he lacked the tools he needed, and the workshop that would be required. The dead ends he kept running into were frustrating, but he would not be deterred.

~~~~~

“What on earth happened to you?” Claire asked, seeing scratches on Jamie’s hands and face.

“Flying squirrels,” he replied, “Doona worry, they’ve been taken care of.”

“You’re serious? Do I need to get you a tetanus shot? Or are you impervious as well as immortal?”

“I shouldna think a few scratches will do me much harm, Sassenach.”

“Brianna wasn’t here, was she?”

“Not to worry, she wasna anywhere near. And I’d have thrown myself into their jaws to keep her safe.”

“Did you – “

“Cleaned and disinfected, as per your standing orders – and I had a medicinal whisky just to be sure.”

“Where were these flying squirrels?”
“Ah, in one of the old chimneys.”

“I wonder what made them come out,” Claire puzzled.

Jamie nodded, agreeingly.

~~~~~

“Jamie?” Claire asked into the darkness.

He kissed her on the temple.

“Yes?”

“I think you should get a tetanus shot tomorrow, and I think we need to look into whether you need a rabies shot. Even if it doesn’t affect you, it could affect us – Bree and me.”

“If you think it’s for the best,” Jamie replied. “I’ve always trusted your judgment. I’ll have to leave a message for the lass – tell her not to come over – maybe I’ll have time for a late lunch wi’ her – if you don’t think me a danger to her.”

“As long as she doesn’t touch the wounds.”

~~~~~

As Bree was leaving her first class, she turned her phone back on and saw that there was a message from Jamie.

“I got into a bit of a scrape yesterday and your mam insisted on takin’ me into work and getting me fixed up, so no film festival today, but maybe we could swing a late lunch? That, and I’ve found… well, we’ll talk about that when next we meet.”

Jamie put down the phone and watched as Claire walked directly toward him.

“I’ve talked to the head of Infectious Diseases. She agrees with me about the tetanus shot, and as for the rabies, unless we could have tested the little beasties, it looks like we should set you up for that series as well, just to be safe.”

“If ye need the critter that scratched me, you shoulda said.”

“You kept it?”

“No, but I can retrieve it from the trash.”

“You’re sure that’s the only one that scratched you?” Claire interrogated, completely in doctor mode.

“Aye, the other’s fled, and I meant to catch the last one and send it on its way, but…” Jamie crossed himself and glanced downward.

“I’ll get you the address of the testing lab. After your tetanus shot, I’d like you to go home and package the squirrel in a sealable plastic bag, and then put that in a cardboard carton, and - actually, I might be able to print a mailing label…I’m going to give you several pairs of gloves – layer them when you handle the remains – keep the second pair on while you remove the outer pair, and put all that stuff in another sealable bag. I need you to be really careful.”
“Claire, you have made the gravity of the situation quite clear.”

Claire nodded and exhaled strongly.

“Will it still be OK to visit the lass?”

“Intellectually, I know the odds of you catching anything are small, and the odds of passing anything to Bree or anyone else are infinitesimal, but as an overprotective mom – it should be fine, just…wash well after handling it…and change your clothes, just in case.”

~~~~~

After an odd trip to the post office to mail the remains of a flying squirrel to the state testing lab, Jamie’s phone pinged for an incoming text.

“Dinner still on? Where to meet?”

Jamie smiled at what he perceived as eagerness on Bree’s part.

“I’ll come to you, food in tow,” he replied.

“OK.”

~~~~~

Brianna met Jamie at the door of her apartment and turned him around and took him back outside.

“You don’t want to go in there,” she advised.

He looked at her, puzzled.

“My roomies have declared they think you’re cute – and not in an innocent way.”

“Oh,” he gulped. “I would never…”

“I know that, it’s just…both of them can be…aggressive.”

Jamie’s eyes went a bit wide.

“You mean they’d…”

“You bet they would, and it looks like you’ve had to fight off something just as fierce. What happened there?” she asked, reaching out to trace the scratch on his nose.

He grabbed her hand before it landed on his skin. He held her hands in his palms.

“You mean they’d…”

“You bet they would, and it looks like you’ve had to fight off something just as fierce. What happened there?” she asked, reaching out to trace the scratch on his nose.

He grabbed her hand before it landed on his skin. He held her hands in his palms.

“You mean they’d…”

“Your mother said I shouldna let ye touch the scratches, at least until the lab results come back.”

“Lab results? What the hell happened?”

“Well, you said I needed to call in someone to get the chimney squared away, and yesterday, I did just that. Wouldn’t ye know it, though, it had a nest of flying squirrels in it, and one of ‘em didna wish to leave the house of its own accord. I just finished mailin’ the one who got me off to a lab to make sure it wasna rabid – your mother was worrit, and I canna say I disagree with her. I have a family now, and must do what I can to keep all of you safe,” Jamie finished, a subdued smile aimed back at Bree.
“How did you get around telling mom what happened?”

“How, I told her the truth – I was attacked by flying squirrels from one of the chimneys – I just didna specify which chimney, and your mam didna ask for clarification,” Jamie animatedly relayed.

“You’re good,” Bree complimented.

“I see you’ve got our dinner – what’d you bring?”

“Aye, I hope ye like crunchy chicken strips in a thin bread wrapper – I think they throw some lettuce in…at least there’s somthin’ green, and I hope it’s edible.”

“Yeah, it is. I’ve had these before. They’re actually pretty good.”

~~~

Their meal ‘al fresco’ went by quickly. They kept smirking back and forth and Jamie was bursting with energy.

“OK – I can’t take any more. You look like you’re about to explode! Does this have something to do with the other part of your message – the part you didn’t want to say over the phone?”

“Aye, it does. I found a place to make the bed.”

“Someone actually makes the style you’re looking for?”

Jamie dropped his head and smiled.

“Not precisely.”

“I think you better explain, then.”

“That’s why I came to you. It’s just a short walk – or we could take the T – three or four stops. Do ye have the time to come wi’ me?”

“I would have been settled in the media room with you normally, so of course I have the time. Besides, you have no idea how much I’m enjoying the chance to see if I can…function in the real world, if I can…go from student of Architecture to practitioner in the field. This room is sorta like a crash course in restoration – and my first time to be a contractor.”

“Och, ye should have no worries in that department, lass. I have no doubt you can do whatever ye set your mind to, or you wouldna have chosen a field that was so challenging.”

“Is that a…veiled way of saying I chose a man’s profession?”

“I didna mean it that way,” he said with a shake of his head. “I’ve seen enough years go by to know thinkin’ any one kind of job bein’ gender specific is ridiculous – except being a mother – no man can do that.”

~~~

They walked to a small shop nestled in a narrow building, Jamie opening and holding the door for Bree. She instantly stopped and looked around, seeing all manner of tool festooning the walls, and assorted sizes and shapes of suction tables that could hold the rails and styles and filler panels for making doors of all sizes. Other work stations were set up for other projects, and in the back were a
number of lathes.

“Where have you brought me?” Brianna asked, looking a bit confused.

“To a place where we can construct a perfect copy of the bed that your mother and I shared at Leoch.”


“I’ll teach you…I had a long talk wi’ the owner, and he’s willing to set aside a work station for us to use. We’ve worked it out, and his rates are quite reasonable…”

Jamie wasn’t sure what Bree was thinking, but he was worried by the expression on her face. With a somewhat defeated tone he said, “I can handle the construction on my own, if I must, but I was hoping it was something we could share.”

“Oh, of course, of course, I’m just not sure I’ll be of much help.”

The owner came out of a back room and approached them, smiling at Jamie’s reappearance.

“Sir, I should like to introduce you to my daughter – she’s almost an architect. Brianna Frazer, this is Mr. Artemus Gordon.”

An absolutely incredulous smirk sprouted on Brianna’s face as he reached out his hand for her to shake. She took his hand and shook it, taking the opportunity to lean in and ask, “Seriously? You must have taken a lot of sh…crap in school over that.”

“Actually, it was my brother who took the brunt of the teasing.”

“Why? What was his name?” She inquired.

“Flash.”

“No way,” Brianna laughed.

“Have I missed something?” Jamie questioned.

“Artemus Gordon was the name of a TV character, and you can’t tell me you’ve never heard of Flash Gordon – that’s a well-known fictional name as well!”

“Aye,” Jamie smiled, “Now that ye mention it – but that’s well before your time, is it not, lass?”

“Yeah…the show is from the 60’s, and the last Flash Gordon movie…”

Bree tilted her head in thought.

“Early 80’s,” Artemis informed them, “Same vintage as my brother.”

Bree laughed breathily. Jamie was intrigued by how animated Brianna was being. A wave of joy swept over him.

“So, your dad tells me you two are trying to recreate a bed from…”

“1743, or thereabouts,” Jamie interjected.

“Yeah, my parents spent part of their honeymoon in a castle, and we’re trying to make a room that
emulates it.”

“Big anniversary coming up, then?” Mr. Gordon asked.

“You have no idea,” Jamie hummed, almost to himself.

“Yeah, it’s a big one,” Bree offered in clarification.

Mr. Gordon gave Bree the nickel tour, with Jamie walking a step behind them as he had gotten the tour his first time around. He heard them talking, but his mind was elsewhere, so he didn’t really hear what they said, but it sounded pleasant enough, like he was leaning on a lush hillside, listening to a pair of birds calling to each other.

“This place is so amazing,” Brianna said as she placed her hand at the bend of Jamie’s elbow.

He exhaled sharply and brought himself back to reality quickly.

“Aye,” he answered, nodding.

“Mr. Frazer, it’ll be a pleasure doing business with the pair of you,” Mr. Gordon offered along with his extended hand. They shook on their deal once more.

“Once we’ve worked out a schedule, I’ll contact you. It’s a surprise for my wife, you see, and…”

“Oh, enough said,” Artemus concurred.

~~~~~

The two of them were subdued on their walk back to Bree’s apartment.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about actually working with tools – you ask me to design a bed, or a table, or whatever, and I’m relatively sure I could do it, but…”

After a few more yards of silent walking, Jamie smiled, a memory dawning on him.

“When your mam showed me all your pictures, she told me that,” he stopped to catch his thoughts together, “you’ve always…excelled at whatever you tried. And I saw it for myself in the videos, and in how quickly you took to knife throwing. You should know what it takes to make the drawing on the page become a reality. It gives ye a sense of understandin’ what you are asking of those who must make your visions come to life.”

Bree nodded in reply, not quite smiling, but trying to figure out how to interpret the warm sensation in her chest. It took her most of the rest of the walk to realize what it was. Jamie’s pride in her abilities was almost tangible, and the feeling of a father’s love was warming her heart.

When they reached the streetlight on the corner by Bree’s apartment, Jamie slowed his pace, and Brianna slowed as well sensing she was pulling ahead.

“Lass?”

The tone of his voice stopped her and made her turn toward him.

“Would it be at all possible for me to…kiss you – on the cheek?”

“I guess.”
Bree blushed bright red as he leaned in and touched a feather light kiss on the apple of her cheek.

“Goodnight sweetheart.”

Bree brought her clenched right hand up to cover her mouth as several tears escaped.

“Goodnight,” she mumbled from behind her hand, and she charged into the building and up the stairs, doing all she could to contain her emotions.

Jamie looked up the side of the building, imagining he could see her climbing to the fourth floor through the walls.

“I love you…Brianna,” he choked out, knowing she couldn’t hear him, but needing to feel her name cross his lips nonetheless.

~~~~~
Claire walked into the bedroom and switched on the light.

“OH,” she exclaimed, seeing Jamie sprawled diagonally across the bed.

“What are you doing here in the dark?” she asked as she slipped off her shoes and let her hair down from where it was secured for the work hours.

Jamie rolled almost to his back, one arm covering his eyes against the sudden brightness, the other down by his side.

“Are you alright, Jamie?” Claire inquired, coming to the foot of the bed and touching his forehead.

“No fever…have you been drinking?”

He started to smile. It grew broader and broader, encompassing more and more of his face until it looked as if his face was about to split in two.

“She let me kiss her,” he began as he uncovered his eyes.

“On the cheek.”

“Brianna?”

Jamie nodded lazily.

He reached his arms up to her and reeled her in.

“How did she react?”

“It was…a bit much for her…she went to her apartment…very quickly. She was…all choked up, but…it wasna a bad parting…Oh, Claire, I love our lass so much. Getting a chance to know her…” Jamie sighed.

Claire took his face in her hands and gave him a quick kiss, then got to her feet again before Jamie
could stop her.

“Where are ye going?” he asked, sliding off the bed and following Claire.

“Shower,” she informed over her shoulder as she sauntered from the room.

“Wait…I’ll join you,” he requested, quickly catching her up.

“I’d like that,” she hummed.

~~~~~

Exhausted, but clean, Jamie and Claire lay wrapped up in the blankets of their bed. Jamie was breathing deeply and sighing with contentment as Claire was pressed against his chest.

“Sassenach?” Jamie queried, “Ye have a birthday soon, do ye not?”

“I do, but Bree’s birthday comes up first – the best birthday present I’ve ever been given,” she informed him, garnering a kiss on the cheek.

“Glad I could do my part,” he cheekily vocalized, snuggling her body in tight.

“With our birthdays only days apart, we’ve always celebrated them together – one cake, one party – we split the difference, chose a day halfway between. It was usually just the two of us,” Claire said with a bittersweet smile and a hint of tears in her eyes.

“Mo nighean dunn, never again will ye celebrate alone, I promise…but if ye have a tradition, I doona wish to intrude…perhaps we could alter it, though?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure, but after you and the lass celebrate your way, you could bring her here. I’d like to do something special for the pair of you…it’s been a long time since I had a reason to celebrate, and getting the pair of you back in my life seems like quite the good reason.”

~~~~~

Jamie and Brianna met at the small wood-working shop the following week to begin work on the bed frame. She was a bit nervous starting off, but Jamie helped her get her footing, and he kept a careful eye on her to keep her from harm. As he observed her at work a smile came over him.
“Are ye a lefty?” he finally asked, seeing how often she switched tools from one side to the other, taking them to her left hand.

“Yeah,” she said with a nod, “Something wrong with that?” she snapped.

“Nah…I am as well,” he proudly informed. “I’m just…glad it is less objectionable in this day and age. It was considered evil at one time – they tried like hell to cure me of it!” he said with a smirk.

“I think mom put the fear of God into some of my early teachers not to interfere with my handedness.”

“Good for her…Ah…speaking of your mam…what do you think she might want for her birthday?”

Bree dropped her head for a moment, a sad smile taking up residence on her face, knowing there was no reason he’d know her birthday, and assuming he would say something if he knew.

“I…I think you coming back into her life is the best present…I’ve never seen her this happy before.”

“Aye, perhaps, but the last gift I gave her – she’s already told me it was the best one ever.”

“What was that?”

“You,” he said, pressing his thumb to the end of her chin.

Brianna gulped as she held her gaze directly into Jamie’s eyes. She was held speechless until she looked away.

“I’m hardly a gift.”

“You are to us.”

“Excuse me for a moment,” she hesitated, then headed to the bathroom to gather herself.

When she returned, Jamie was unwilling to back-track on the emotional progress he felt he had made.

“Then what would like for your birthday? I know it is just days before your mam’s, and I want to do something special for my girls.”
“I don’t know,” she toned.

“We’ll sort it out,” Jamie assured.

~~~~~

“No Brianna today?” Claire inquired seeing Jamie sitting in the kitchen when she got home.

“She headed home early – I think making her feel makes her tired, like learning a new skill.”

“I’m just glad she’s willing to open up to you…Well, I’ve got some good news for you – your test results are in, I mean the flying squirrel’s test results – no rabies.”

“Good to hear.”

“What is that I smell?”

“Dinner – a little something I whipped up.”

Claire tilted her head.

“You needn’t look at me like that – I survived many a year before ‘take-out’ came along. So come here and let me feed you up proper,” Jamie invited, extending a hand enticingly toward her.

~~~~~

As much as he wanted Brianna to have a hand in every part of the construction of the bed, Jamie was on a deadline, and with Bree only available a day or two each week, he plunged onward with the wood working, choosing a day that regrettably saw him working alone to form the four posts that would support the structure from the floor to the ceiling.

With absolute accuracy, Jamie reproduced the multiple sections for four identical posts on the lathe, leaving square the parts needed for assembly of the lower frame, and beautifully shaping the rest. He left several bits seemingly unfinished, but clamped those parts in a vice and proceeded to carve by hand some of the more intricate designs that would not have been achievable by machine.

He hoped Brianna wouldn’t be disappointed that he had gone ahead, but as he looked over the day’s accomplishments, he was almost sure she’d like what he’d done. He fitted the post’s components together in one last dry fit and nodded to himself.
“Damn good job, even if you do say it yourself,” Mr. Gordon commented, dropping a hand on Jamie’s shoulder.

“Aye,” Jamie replied.

“Just you today?” he confirmed.

“Aye, the lass has classes.”

He patted Jamie twice on the back of the shoulder and nodded.

“Well, it looks to be coming together nicely – have you thought about finishes?”

“Actually, I have been giving that some thought, but I’m a bit torn – do I go with a natural finish, something that would either compliment or match the woodwork in the room, or choose an appropriate color of a milk paint that might…liven up the space a might. I think I must run those options past my daughter – she’d know better what her mam would like…I hope.”

Artemis chuckled at Jamie’s hopefulness.

“Good luck with that – I mean figuring out what a woman wants. I mean, look at this grand gesture you are making – if I made my wife a bed for our anniversary, we’d probably not be using it right away. She’d take one look and think I was insinuating something about our marriage that was missing!”

Jamie nodded, but chose to keep mum.

~~~~~

Claire woke to the feeling of Jamie nuzzling her belly button. He then turned his head and radiated a smile up at her face. Claire greeted him brightly with her own smile.

“What?” she asked, running her fingers through his hair.

Jamie kissed her inner wrist in passing. He smiled broader and waggled his shoulders in delight.

“What?” Claire asked again in a chirping voice.

“Hmmmm…I was thinking about what you would have looked like had you lived through the disco
years…A little halter top – bell bottoms that could fit three of you in each leg, and your belly button peeking out just above the top. Your hair, permed and standing out a foot in all directions from your head – and a pair of platform shoes – maybe the ones with little goldfish swimming around in the heels.”

Jamie pantomimed a fish, his hand swimming toward Claire’s face until he pinched the tip of her nose, making her giggle.

“What made you think about me in the disco era? Do you spend a lot of time thinking about my clothing? I mean, other than getting me out of them?”

“I do, actually,” he replied. “I started thinkin’ ‘bout it in 1948. I watched so many trends come and go – pictured what you’d look like in each one. So many changes in the years between when you expected to come back and when you actually did. You missed some interesting years, clothing-wise.”

Jamie chortled to himself.

“What now?”

Jamie’s face pinked deeply.

“I was thinkin’ what you’d look like as one of the women from those Robert Palmer videos, and then I imagined you in a jacket with those enormous shoulder pads - even you’d barely have a visible neck dressed like that.”

“By the sound of it, I’m better off having missed most of those trends, but I will say it was quite an adjustment going from corsets and full skirts, leap-frogging over brassieres and baggy undies, right into stretchy fabrics and thongs!”

“You didn’t?”

“I tried them – it was awful, just dreadfully uncomfortable and invasive.”

“I would think so, Sassenach.”

Jamie slowly rubbed his head back and forth on Claire’s stomach.

“So…this is your long day?”

“Long will not begin to describe it. I know it’s necessary, but doing the morbidity and mortality
case reviews always leaves me in a dark place.”

“Give me a call before you head home and I’ll have a hot meal ready for ye.”

“I’d rather have you ready for me,” Claire purred.

“But you’ll need the food first,” Jamie cooed.

Claire bit her bottom lip.

~~~~~

“Dinner at the house tonight?” the text on Brianna’s phone read.

“Sure,” she tapped back, curious because she was headed there to work on the room anyway.

She had stopped in at the woodworking shop to see what Jamie had gotten done. Mr. Gordon was surprised at her appearance at the shop today, but had happily shown her the posts Jamie worked so hard on.
“I just wanted to see how far he got. I know we’re running out of time. I had no idea he knew how to do such carving,” she said with a slight shake of her head. Bree actually teared up as she ran her hands over the intricate designs.

“He hoped you’d like them, I could tell. That man would hold up the planet and turn it by hand for you.”

Bree smiled with tears in her eyes, fighting not to dissolve into a complete mess.

“Taing dhut,” she said with a dip of her head.

Artemis pointed and smiled in surprise.

“He’s taught you the Gaelic then?”

“I’ve looked up a few phrases…he hasn’t used much of it in front of me, but I think I might ask him to teach me more of it.”

“Good for you.”
The ride over the river to Griff’s house felt very long this time. Brianna felt like she was swimming upstream, but her verve returned as soon as the house came into sight. She jogged up the stairs, knocked and quickly entered the house.

“I’m here,” she announced.

“Kitchen,” she heard Jamie call back.

“What’s cooking?” Brianna asked.

“Something restorative for your mam – she has what they call M and M meetings today.”

With a quickly thrown back head, Brianna said, “Oh.”

“Your familiar, then?”

“Let’s just say…I got a lot of really tight hugs on M and M days.”

“Aye…I can imagine…would you like to make her your brownies for tonight’s dessert?”

“I don’t carry the recipe with me.”

“Voila,” Jamie accentuated with a flourish of hand gestures, and presented Bree with a copy of the recipe Claire had dashed off for him when he started to do the cooking for them on a daily basis.

“I’ve tried it a couple of times, but…”

“Stand back and let the brownie wizard get to work!” she happily agreed.

“When those are done, and I’ve got the stew on, I need your help picking out…well…everything – what colors your mam would like. I realized when I searched before, I know so very little about her tastes after so long. I talked to Mr. Gordon, and he agreed to let me have items shipped to his establishment so they wouldn’t be showing up here and ruining the surprise. Things that come in boxes I might be able to hide, but I’ve a mattress coming, and I doona think I can talk my way around that even with both of you having birthdays soon.”

Brianna laughed and Jamie beamed back at her. If only he could hug her…but he knew, when the time was right, she would hug him.
You Can't Always Get What You Want (on the internet)

You Can’t Always Get What You Want (on the internet)

“I stopped by the woodshop – the posts are amazing. The hand carved parts – I had no idea you could do that.”

Jamie blushed as he smiled and looked down. Words were failing him. He placed a hand over Brianna’s hand on the table, giving it a squeeze and nodding twice as his reply. He slowly sat, still unable to speak.

They both nodded and sighed for a while.

“Umm… I better get the brownies before they burn,” Brianna suddenly blurted, making the move toward the oven.

~~~~

Seated once again to Jamie’s right, the pair uneasily smiled and nodded and blushed.

“So… you said you went to some of the sites, but…”

“It was rather overwhelming,” Jamie interrupted.

“Maybe if we break things down to categories – you said you picked out a mattress?”

“I found a place that made mattresses in a traditional fashion – I hope that wasna a mistake. We’ve been sleepin’ on a mattress with… um… lots of bounce, and this one…”

“So it’s like a futon?” Bree asked.

“Aye, after that fashion.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” she offered, hoping to diffuse the need to further this line of inquiry.

“It’s a standard size?” Brianna hazarded to ask.

“Aye, king size.”

“OK… oh, that’s hideous,” Bree commented as she looked at several sheet sets available, “Nope… there’s nothing on this site… Um, I think we need to figure out a few more basic things – have you chosen a color for the bed frame?”

“Mr. Gordon asked me the very same thing. I’ve been thinking about it. I think it needs to be a stain, and something lighter in shade than the dark woodworking the room already has – a warm color – like a fine whisky or sherry – perhaps a… tint of red to it – like honey lit through a stained glass window at sunset.”

Bree bit her lip listening to the way he was describing the color he wanted.

“I think I understand why my mom fell in love with you…”

Brianna stopped herself and took in a deep breath, realizing she’d said that out loud. Without a word, Jamie lifted Bree’s hand and placed a soft kiss on the back of it.
“Thank-you for that. It means a lot.”

“‘You’re right, this is impossible,’” Bree admitted after coming to another dead end with the internet search to furnish the Leoch room.

Jamie was checking on the pot of stew on the stove and smiled sheepishly in Brianna’s direction.

“Glad it wasna just me,” he quipped.

“We’ve been at this for over an hour and all I’ve managed to order is the mattress cover…and I know we’re running out of time if we want everything to be delivered by our deadline…Arrrrr – this is frustrating!”

Bree tapped her forehead down on the table next to her laptop.

“Don’t fret yet, lass, we’ve got near on a month, and as long as the bed is finished, we’ll make due. Your mam and I survived some spare times – times when both sleep and food were uncertainties – we’ll survive without a ‘duvet cover’.”

“I know you will, but you shouldn’t have to! I want this to be perfect. I’m just beginning to understand what my mom gave up to have me…I’ve always known she loves me, but…”

Bree gulped, unable to continue. She turned her focus back to the computer screen and began typing. Jamie sat once more beside her, his hands nested in each other. He watched his daughter’s face as a myriad of emotions crossed it until he could take no more and reached out for her chin.

“Lass, I forced your mam to leave me…I made her give up everything else so that you might live. I had the hope the two of you lived, and still it broke me…I can only imagine what she went through, for she thought me dead, at least for a time.”

A heavy silence fell over the pair, Jamie unsure how to proceed. He began to pull his hand back, releasing Bree’s chin, when she grabbed his hand, but kept her eyes lowered and dropped her head as well.

“She tried…Mom tried to keep you alive for me, and I wouldn’t let her. She had to hide her feelings, even from me…so I need to do this, and I need it to be perfect. It’s the least I can do.”

Brianna looked up and saw the tear trails on Jamie’s face, and he saw a fiercely determined gaze from her. He nodded slowly and wrapped his other hand around her hands that were wrapped around his hand.

“Then perfect it will be,” Jamie promised.

“I think part of the problem is that we’re trying to pick out things that need to be touched and seen in person,” Brianna mused as the website she was on failed to provide what she needed, “If only…wait a minute – this site has a real store, and it’s in Boston.”

Jamie came and stood at Bree’s shoulder, looking at the map on the page.

“We don’t have time today, but we certainly could get there and back during your mam’s work day.”
“Or…we tell mom we’re going out shopping together – she’d be so happy to hear it, and we wouldn’t have a time limit. We could drop off anything we find at Mr. Gordon’s, or if we’re back earlier, we can put the stuff in the room – maybe even start seeing where everything goes.”

Bree looked up at Jamie and smiled, the tension of earlier all but gone. The eagerness in her visage transferring to his face until the excitement could be felt in the room.

“It would be my pleasure to escort you on such an outing.”

Claire swept into the kitchen and grabbed Jamie, pulling him down on top of her across the table, their heads landing inches from where Brianna was seated. She kissed him repeatedly, almost getting Jamie to forget they weren’t alone.

Brianna cleared her throat and said, “Mom?”

Claire tilted her head back a little further, making eye contact with her daughter.

“Brianna…Hi.”

“Hi, indeed.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to be here.”

“Clearly,” Bree said with a smirk.

“Um…” Claire hummed, looking a bit flustered.

Jamie brought her back up to her feet.

“I thought you might like both of us to be here.”

“That’s very thoughtful, Jamie…and Bree, it is good to see you. It feels like ages,” she confessed, reaching out to get a hug. Mother and daughter squeezed each other tight, Jamie feeling just the slightest bit envious, but also proud of their bond.

“Is this a…dessert first kind of night?” Jamie inquired.


“Ooh,” Claire reacted, “Yes, please.”

The three of them shared their meal in reverse order, lingering around the table, but Brianna could see the looks Claire was beaming at Jamie. She realized her mother had other thoughts on her mind.

“I’ve enjoyed this, but I should get going,” Bree offered, standing as she said so.

Jamie stood at the same time.

“You’ll be alright getting home on your own, lass?”

“Sure. I’ve walked the streets of Boston for many years, and I’ve never felt threatened. Be sure to tell mom about our plans.”
“I will. Well, then…” Jamie sighed, putting his hands out to take hers in tow. She didn’t hesitate to clasp his hands in return this time. They smiled and nodded at each other. Bree turned to hug her mother yet again.

“What plans?” Claire murmured in her daughter’s ear.

“Jamie will bring you up to speed. I hope you can put this day behind you…but at least I’m not leaving you alone with your thoughts tonight. I know where your mind goes on these nights.”

They nodded together, each remembering.

“It really was good to see you,” Claire reaffirmed.

“Shall I walk ye to the door, then?” Jamie offered.

“I wouldn’t want to keep you two apart any longer than necessary.”

“And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?” Claire haughtily voiced.

“You know very well your mind has not been thinking about food since you polished off that brownie.”

Claire’s face showed astonishment, her mouth ajar as she saw that her daughter had seen right through her glass face, and that she had an adult understanding of the signals she had been trying to subdue all evening.

“As promised before, I’ll take care of your mother,” Jamie informed. Claire gave a gentle swat to the back of his shoulder.

In her mind, Brianna snarkily replied, “I’m sure you will,” but she simply smirked, one eyebrow involuntarily lifting.

Bree looked back over her shoulder after leaving the room and saw Jamie wrap his arms around her mother as she at first wriggled like she was attempting to escape, then settled into his grasp and kissed him happily, the smile on her face broad and expressive.

“I love you so much,” Claire sighed, taking Jamie’s jaw in her clasp.

He couldn’t resist engaging her lips. She rose to her tip-toes as they kissed, and she stroked her hands down his jaw to his chin. When their lips parted, Claire pulled back her hands, turned quickly in Jamie’s arms, found his hands with hers and urged Jamie forward and toward their bedroom. A good meal had gone a long way toward her physical restoration, and after she’d had her way with Jamie, her emotional restoration would be well on the way to complete as well.

~~~~~
Hunting And Gathering

Claire’s alarm went off. With one hand she shut it off, the other hand automatically wandering across the bed to find Jamie’s form.

“Jamie?” she sleepily inquired, not finding him in the bed. For a second, she feared these last few months had been a dream. Claire wiped the sleep from her eyes as best she could and spotted Jamie sitting in the chair for the dressing table, bent over and putting on his shoes.

“What are you doing up so early? Even the sun is groggy at this hour,” she attempted to joke.

“I need to make sure one of the vehicles is in working order.”

“Does this have something to do with the ‘plans’ you and Brianna have?”

“Aye.”

“You’re being rather close-mouthed about whatever you two are up to.”

“Aye,” he replied again, his eyes twinkling as a smiled crept over his face, accompanied by a nod.

“Can you give me a hint?” she wheedled, bending forward in the bed, reaching down and wrapping her hands around her ankles.

Jamie hummed as he contemplated what to say.

“Think…momentous occasions,” he burred, and then stood and shook the ankles of his jeans down over the tops of his hiking boots.

“Does…this have anything to do with my birthday…wait…if it is about my birthday, and you think ‘momentous occasion’ is the appropriate phrase, I ought to swat you,” she said in a mock serious tone.

Jamie just smiled broader. Claire extracted herself from the bed and advanced upon Jamie, wrapping her arms around his neck and giving him a quick kiss on the lips.

“Well, if it’s not my birthday, is it about being able to celebrate Bree’s birthday for the first time?”

Jamie’s smile grew and grew.

“Oh, you can be infuriatingly unreadable – give me another hint.”

“I could, but then you wouldna be surprised, nor would ye be able to tell the authorities ye knew nothing afore hand,” he whispered in jest.

Claire raised an eyebrow, and stared at Jamie with a jaundiced eye. Jamie broke into laughter, and risked leaning in for another kiss.

“I can see I’m not going to get a straight answer this morning,” she concluded, “and I have to get ready for work now. Just promise me you’ll come home safe, and get Brianna home in the same state?”
“Cross my heart.”

“Alright, then,” Claire accepted.

As she headed out of the room, Claire turned back and happily took in the striking image of Jamie gnawing on his lower lip, excited and nervous about his day to come. He sat at the foot of the bed and slumped a bit.

“You look great in that shirt…it matches your eyes.”

He sat up tall, like a Meer cat peering from its den. A shy smile curled his lips, and he nodded once.

~~~~~

Bree was up bright and early, ready to go on her shopping adventure with Jamie. She emerged from her apartment, noticing the vehicle parked at the end of the block. The driver’s side opened, and the driver exited, standing head and shoulders above the roof line. Bree’s mouth dropped open as she realized it was Jamie. She trotted over.

“I was headed over to the house. It’s closer to where we’re headed,” she pointed out, cocking her head, and splaying her hands on her hips.

“I know…but…I was too excited to wait. Are you ready to get going?” Jamie asked.

Brianna nodded.

Jamie leaned down into the cab and reached across to unlock Bree’s side, and opened the door for her while he was within reach. She bounded onto the seat and pulled her door shut, Jamie doing the same on his side.

“Sure you don’t want me to drive?” Brianna offered.

Jamie just raised an eyebrow at her.

“This thing is ancient,” she commented, then blushed, realizing Jamie was older by centuries.

“Well, it is older than I am at least,” she offered in apology. Jamie snorted a laugh.

“It may be a venerable vehicle, but I believe this Jeep Wagoneer has the capacity we need should we find the items we seek for the room.”

They set off, taking a right when they reached the intersection, and shortly thereafter, a left that took them across the Charles River headed back toward the Harvard area. At first, they were both quiet – this was new, riding in a car together felt odd. Brianna decided to acknowledge the awkwardness.

“It’s so strange, being in a car again. My last couple of years of high school we still lived outside the city, and I drove all the time, but since I’ve been in college, I’ve only driven a handful of times. For my needs, it kinda doesn’t make sense right now.”

“So, you do drive, then?”

“Of course I do – I have, well, had, a car in storage. I sold it off, but mom kept her car.”

Jamie couldn’t hold his smile.
“What does your mam drive?” he asked through pinched lips.

“A smart car – I can barely get in it, and every time I have to get out I feel like a baby chicken hatching, forcing my way out of a shell.”

“Hoot,” sounded from Jamie’s lips as a breathy laugh.

“It’s not funny…unless you’re watching me try to get out of it!” Bree began laughing halfway through.

They were quiet again for a bit. Bree surreptitiously studied Jamie, realizing he was wearing the same chambray shirt he’d been wearing a few weeks ago when he’d come to her apartment. This time it was paired with black jeans.

“I like that shirt on you…it goes with your eyes.”

The one-sided smiled peeled up the side of his face.

“Your mam thinks so as well, so it must be true.”

Jamie pulled over to the curb and took out his phone, calling up the map to the store.

“Something wrong?” Bree asked.

“I may have missed the turn - would you take a look,” he asked, handing his phone over to her.

“Nope, we’re still OK. It looks like the next left, and then two rights – we’re close.”

Brianna reached Jamie’s phone back toward him, but he waved her off.

“Hang on to it.”

His focus was already on getting back into traffic.

~~~~

After securing a parking space and turning off the engine, Jamie exhaled deeply and turned his smile toward Brianna.

“Ready?” he asked, feeling like he was about to start a hunt that would prove more difficult than taking down a large beast ever had been.

As she read his eyes, Brianna’s heart started beating faster, sensing Jamie’s apprehension and thrill of the hunt to come. Bree nodded. She opened the car door and spun herself on the seat in a single move, feet hitting the gravel of the parking lot with a crunch.

As the pair of them cleared the front of the car, a glint at Jamie’s side caught the corner of Brianna’s eye.

“Are you armed?” she asked, leaning in to mumble her concern.

“What? – Och - ” he puffed, “Only with a carpenter’s weapon,” he clarified, pulling a metal tape measure off his belt and showing it to Brianna. She released a worried breath, smiled sheepishly and turned bright pink at her mistake.

The building was unassuming – a survivor of a strip mall whose neighbors had not been so lucky –
standing amid a crushed gravel sea. The simple metal and glass façade belied what they hoped to find within the store, and Bree jumped slightly when the sharp ringing of a bell accompanied opening the door. Jamie took the door from Brianna’s grasp, holding it open until she cleared, and then slipping past it himself. He placed his open palm gently on her back, then slid it off to the left as he walked off in that direction, heading into the depths of the store.

Bree stood, looking around, wondering if the website had been false advertising. Shelves were piled floor to roof with bolt after bolt of cloth that was obscured with wrapping to protect it, and anything over six feet up was out of reach.

“How may we serve you today?” an almost overly pleasant voice inquired.

Bree turned her head abruptly, startled a bit.

“Um, hello…yes…We’re trying to recreate a bedroom from about 1743 – We’ve almost finished the bedframe, but so far I haven’t been able to find blankets, and pillow covers, or pillows for that matter – and the curtains – those have been impossible…Would you have…anything like that?” Brianna asked, not overly encouraged and trying to steel herself for disappointment.

“Why, yes, we should be able to find you something quite suitable.”

“Really?” Bree almost squealed with delight, finally taking note that the voice was attached to a woman of average height with medium brown hair that flowed around her face like wide kelp. Her eyes were also brown, Bree noted as the relief washed over her.

“We provide the bed linens and other assorted textiles for a number of historic inns in the greater New England area. Follow me.”

“Um…” Bree tried to clear her throat to call out for Jamie, but then wondered if she should. She looked back and forth from where the woman was quickly disappearing to where Jamie had slipped into the depths of the shelves of merchandise. She made a turn in his direction and made a single call of “Jamie!” before following the woman into a completely different part of the store, hoping Jamie would hear her voice and try to follow it.

A few of Bree’s long strides and she was right at the salesperson’s heels, surrounded by dark, bold colors and tapestry–like prints set up on truncated bed end displays. Most had a window in a mocked-up wall to show drapery for the specific style that was represented. A number were a little too ‘cottage whimsy’ to even be considered, but there were several that drew Brianna’s eye almost immediately. She walked, nearly spellbound, her hands reaching out to feel the fabric, stroke it like a beloved pet.

“This one,” she softly hummed, “or this one,” she thought out loud, as she caught sight of a second color scheme she was sure her mother would like. Brianna was in deep consideration of four differing color/pattern selections when Jamie finally made an appearance with a triumphant smirk and swaggering step that would have had his kilt swinging side to side had he been wearing one.

“Have ye been here the whole time?” he asked.

“I called out…I guess you didn’t hear me,” Bree replied, wondering if he would have heard her had she called him ‘dad’ instead of ‘Jamie’, but knowing she would have choked on the word had she tried to voice it this soon since their meeting.

“I’ve got it narrowed down to four choices – what d’ya think?”

“Not that one,” Jamie said with a wince as he surveyed a selection of blue and green hues.
“It makes me feel sea sick.”

“Oh, really?” Bree murmured, mildly surprised.

“Aye – I would feel trapped aboard ship if I were to wake to that each morning.”

“This must be your husband,” the kelp-haired woman wrongly reported as she returned to see if Brianna had made her decision.

“He’s my father,” Bree corrected, making the saleslady seem to shrink into the floor a few inches.

“You can make custom sizes on the curtains?” Jamie asked before the poor woman got swallowed up by the floor any further.

“Oh, yes,” the woman gratefully answered, happy to get back to business after sticking her foot in her mouth.

“If you just provide the measurements you need, we can have items on their way to you within a week of the order,” she fell into a well-rehearsed spiel with her overly-happy vocal style.

“Thank-you,” Jamie said with a single nod of his head, and then turned his attention back to Brianna and the choice they had to make.

Bree had Jamie touch the different fabrics of the remaining choices. They came to a consensus, called the salesperson back over, and placed the order for what needed to be customized. They collected up the off-the-shelf items that were standardized sizes, and Bree began carting their purchases out to the Wagoneer while Jamie settled the bill.

Bree was about to get into the passenger side when Jamie came out and leaned his weight against the door before she could open it.

“Come wi’ me?” he asked, extending a hand.

Brianna raised one brow and gave Jamie a curious look. His smile engaging, Bree melted just a bit and took his hand.

“There’s another side to the business here,” he informed Bree as they walked around the side of the building toward what looked like a garage or a siding for train cars.

“I accidentally walked out of the cloth shop and into…well, have a look, will you?”

They ambled side by side into the voluminous space, Brianna’s eyes going wide.

“It looks like a castle threw up in here!” Bree proclaimed.

“The man who runs this side of the business calls it ‘salvage & overstocks’ – it’s all things no one wants anymore.”

“I love places like this,” Brianna clucked, “Many a college dorm room has been furnished out of stores like this – half the time at the end of the term the hallways look like this with all the stuff that’s been left behind. I don’t know if you noticed, all the dishes in my apartment are salvage.”

“I hadn’t, actually, but it makes good sense. I think we may be able to find most of what we’ll need for the room here.”

Jamie threw a friendly wave at the proprietor as the pair of them dove into the endless stacks of
stuff, looking for just the right items for the Leoch room. Several times the measuring tape made
their decision for them, with Jamie shaking his head to inform Bree that, while what they found
seemed perfect, it would not quite fit the space he had allotted it in the room.

“Och, what a shame, there’s a crack in this chamber pot.”

“You do still have indoor plumbing. Why would you need that thing?”

“Sentimental reasons, perhaps?” Jamie sort-of joked.

“Ugghhh,” was the reaction he elicited from his daughter, and it made him laugh.

Some time later, Brianna heard Jamie sigh an “Ahhh, perfect,” and turned her head to see her father
caressing a pair of small stemmed glasses. Not delicate flutes by any means, these glasses were
sturdy, yet still elegant and beautiful.

“We drank from glasses much like these on our wedding night,” Jamie waxed, a faraway flame
burning in his memory. “Your mam is the most beautiful woman, she was then, and she is now. I
had no choice when it came to falling in love with her – she owned my heart without even tryin’.”

~~~~~~

The day’s hunt successful, father and daughter returned once more to the Wagoneer that was laden
with the spoils.

“I could use a coffee,” Jamie declared, massaging his brow.

“So could I,” Brianna agreed, “and a little something to eat wouldn’t hurt.”

“Did you not have breakfast, lass?”

“Not one that will hold ‘til supper time,” she sarcastically quipped.

“We’re hours from supper yet lass – what did you have that served ye so poorly?”

“…I had a muffin,” she shyly mumbled.

“Bran? Oatmeal? Blueberry?” Jamie asked one after the other, Brianna shaking her head each time.
He raised one eyebrow and tilted his head.

“OK – it was chocolate chip!” she confessed.

Jamie shook his head slowly side to side, broad smiled painted on his lips.

“Well, no wonder, then!”

Brianna crossed her arms on her chest and did her best to scowl at Jamie, but she couldn’t hold it,
breaking into a smile of her own.

“OK – I know…I was nervous eating…today seemed…so big…important…and it was chocolate,”
she added barely audibly.

“I’ll find us a place to get a bite, then,” Jamie confirmed.

“So what did you have…for breakfast?” Bree wanted to know.
Jamie hesitated as he checked all his mirrors.

“Um… I couldn’a eat this mornin’ – I was too nervous,” he admitted.

Bree bit her bottom lip. After a lifetime of not having a father, it felt odd to know she took after him so closely, yet it seemed that each new thing she learned about Jamie just made her realize how much like him she was.

~~~~~

No one else was braving the elements, but Jamie and Brianna sat at the outside table with their coffees and sandwiches, letting the breeze make the coffee drinkable.

“I must ask,” Jamie began, “why would you think me armed?” he said as he leaned in.

“Um…well… I don’t know… we were… going into… unfamiliar territory… you might have thought… you needed to protect me?” she inhaled.

Jamie caught the laugh just at his lips, and did all that was possible to swallow it back down, but it was no use. It rumbled up through his chest, escaping in spurts until it broke into the open.

“Un… unfamiliar territory? Oh, lass…” Jamie’s hand pressed against his heart as he threw his head skyward, tears streaming from his eyes as the laughter wracked his whole body.

“I… I may no’ be a regular shopper of yard goods, but… I… Ohh,” he shook his head as he beamed at his daughter.

He wrapped a parental paw over the cap of Brianna’s shoulder, thinking he would risk the possible wrath of hugging her had only the table not been in his way. His body continued to quiver, and he held his gaze to the table, letting his head hang limply.

“Unfamiliar territory,” he chortled, “Oh, mo chride, you…” he shook his head and raised his smile so Bree could see it, “You have a wit that rivals your mother’s.”

Brianna had been quietly laughing, watching the joy on her father’s face when she heard him voice words she couldn’t understand, but by the tone of Jamie’s voice, she figured it was either something really sweet or a veiled way to swear.

“Ma cree?” she questioned.

“Och, it means ‘my heart’.”

“I figured it was something like that… do you… think you could teach me?”

“It would be my pleasure, a leannan – it means ‘sweetheart’,” Jamie informed Bree, not wanting to waste a moment of teaching time.

~~~~~
“So…shall we try to get our purchases into the room before your mam gets home?”

“Only if you wanna get caught…it’s already after four, and we’ve got a lot of stuff to unpack. I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise at this point.”

Jamie flashed a quick smile and cast a momentary glance in Brianna’s direction, but got his eyes back on the road ahead before he caused an accident.

“Should I call Mr. Gordon to warn him we’re on the way?” Brianna offered.

“I suppose that would be the polite thing to do,” Jamie replied as he switched lanes to take a more direct route to Brianna’s neighborhood, and Mr. Gordon’s shop.

“Mr. Gordon, this is Brianna Frazer…I’m fine, thank-you for asking…um…yes, it has been a fine day,” Bree felt a lump rise in her throat as she looked at Jamie, then had to look away before she felt overwhelmed. “Would it be alright if we dropped a few items off with you for safe-keeping?…Great…we’ll be there in about fifteen to twenty minutes, unless the traffic picks up…What was that?...So true!,” Bree enthused.

“You two have forged a nice friendship. It shows in the way you talk to each other.”

“He reminds me of a teacher I had in high school – always fair, but didn’t take any crap either – I guess kinda…fatherly.”

Jamie nodded.

“I’m glad…that ye had such people in your life since…I couldna…”

“You’re here now, and…I still have a lot of milestones to come – things I’ll be…awfully glad to have a father around for…if you want to…”

“Anyone who tries to keep me away will find themselves in great peril,” Jamie voiced zealously.

Jamie and Brianna were quiet for the remainder of the trip to Mr. Gordon’s shop. Bree slumped down and pressed her knees against the dashboard, the weight of the day finally taking its toll. She was breathing slow and calm as her mind relived everything that had happened since she saw Jamie parked down the street this morning. Suddenly her eyelids felt like lead. She fought to keep her eyes open, but soon she had drifted into slumber, one side of her mouth curling up into a smile.

Jamie pulled into a curbside space in front of Mr. Gordon’s wood working shop, and turned to Brianna, only to see that she was asleep. She was comfortable enough with him, trusted him enough, to let down her guard. Jamie’s heart leapt. Part of him wanted to let her sleep just so he could watch her. He could imagine Bree as a young girl, with Claire tucking the blankets in around her. He almost touched her cheek when her eyes snapped open. He touched her cheek anyway and smiled warmly at his daughter. She smiled in return, and didn’t pull away, in fact, she leaned into
his touch.

“Thank you…for being willing to let me into your life.”

“Um…I don’t know what to say to that,” she confessed, then bit her lip.

Artemis came out of the shop and tapped on Bree’s side window, happy to see her, and waved at Jamie across the cab of the jeep. Jamie dropped his head as the one sided smile crept up his face.

“We should…get things unpacked,” Jamie suggested, starting to pull his hand away. Bree grabbed it quickly, squeezed his hand really tight, and then let go. That meant more to Jamie than any words she might utter.

~~~~~

Mr. Gordon assessed each piece as they brought it into his shop, pointing out what little fixes Jamie and Bree might want to employ to improve the longevity of the items.

“You hit the mother-load, it seems,” Artemis quipped.

“Aye, we did,” Jamie enthusiastically replied.

“And it was a lot cheaper than I thought we’d get away for,” Brianna added as she brought one of the chairs in and set it down.“The bedding and curtains were more expensive than everything else for the room.”

“The only time I’ve ever bought something more expensive made of fabric was when I had to finally replace my kilt!” Jamie professed with a roll of his eyes.

Artemis clucked a laugh and nodded.

~~~~~

Once every piece was moved from the jeep to the shop, they all took a breath, surveying the lot.

“Well, this should do nicely to fill the room you’ve described, sir,” he said to Jamie.

“Aye…I’ll be by to collect the bed frame tomorrow, that should help with the space here.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m glad to do my part. Oh, by the way, I found this article - ” Artemis began , walking away to his desk. “Remember t’other week, we got to reminiscing about foods that have all but disappeared outside of Scotland proper? Well, I found this,” he said, offering the torn off half page to Jamie.

Bree came over and looked over Jamie’s shoulder.

“What is it?” she asked of both Mr. Gordon and her father, whoever would answer.

“It’s…a recipe…for bannocks.”

“Bannocks?” Bree questioned, the sound of the word foreign coming from her.

“Aye…it’s an oat cake – very delicious, and quite hearty. If you started the day with bannocks instead of a chocolate chip muffin, you’d be able to make it clear through to suppertime without so much as a grumble from ye’re wame.”
Bree turned slightly pink, but smiled, knowing he was using her breakfast choice as the basis of a joke, and that it was simply good-natured ribbing, and was not meant to be cruel.

“Perhaps we both could have benefitted from them this morning,” Bree shot back.

Jamie wrapped one arm around Bree’s back and gave her the quickest kiss on the temple before pulling away and offering his hand to Artemis for a solid shake. “Thank-you,” he offered. “You’ve made this all possible.”

Mr. Gordon smiled broadly.

“My pleasure…and meeting the two of you – it is a delight to see a father and a daughter with such an…obvious affection. I canna think of one of you without the other.”

Brianna started to laugh. She cast a sideways glance at Jamie and she could see him holding in his own laugh.

“What did I say?” Mr. Gordon inquired.

“We didn’t meet until this July,” Bree chuckled, “And it may have been one of the worst first meetings in history.”

“Aye, it was…rough…to say the least…but…I think we’re doin’ rather well at finding our way forward.”

“You’d never know,” Artemis Gordon informed the pair, shaking his head. “You’d never know.”

~~~~~

“Come for dinner?” Jamie hopefully asked once they were back in the jeep, not wanting this day to end.

“You don’t think mom will try to find out where we went?” she asked in reply.

“Och, I’m sure she’ll try,” Jamie joked with a tilt of his head. “Perhaps…if there are fresh bannocks awaitin’ her – ev’ry time she asks somethin’ I’ll ply her with another morsel until she forgets what she wanted to know.”

“Are bannocks really that good, or do you just remember them so fondly they’ve taken on epic proportions?”

“Only one way to find out – come and make them with me.”

~~~~~

I arrived home to the most beautiful aroma wafting out the front door, and an even more beautiful scene in the kitchen that aroma was being created in. My two tall redheads were shoulder to shoulder, standing at the counter, Brianna carefully drawing a knife across a patted out dough, Jamie cautiously lifting squares of it onto a baking sheet.

They were giggling and nudging each other, the genuine joy wafting along with the aroma.

“What’s this?” I asked, unable to remain a silent observer any longer.

Jamie turned and came over to me, giving me a welcoming kiss and half hug, keeping his dough covered fingers out of my hair.
“We’re... playing with a bannock recipe, tweaking the ingredients, I think she said,” he voiced with a tilt of his head toward Bree.

I found myself smiling, and feeling that the pair of them had made a breakthrough, an advancement in their understanding of the father-daughter relationship. I was so happy for the both of them. For a moment, I could believe this was the life I had been living for the last twenty years – my husband taking care of our daughter, so I could have the vocation I desired. I could feel the family coming together, and a tear crawled down my cheek.

“Something wrong, Sassenach?” Jamie asked, seeing me wiping away the tear.

“No, everything is right,” I answered, another tear escaping.

~~~~~

I gave up trying to find out where Jamie and Brianna had gone after the fifth try, knowing I was simply going to get a mouth full of bannock and two broad smiles. Jamie and Bree had become partners in crime, and neither was going to ‘rat’ the other out. In a few short months, Jamie had been able to pry open a small crack, and wriggle his way into her heart. I’d seen him do it before. He’s always had a way with people, but to see him find his own daughter’s heart, and bring out the part of her that always reminded me of him – it was magical.

We scratched together a small meal to go along with the bannocks, and were well filled, physically and emotionally.

It was still early, so when Jamie asked Bree and me down to the media room, we both readily agreed. Jamie and I sat together on the chaise while Brianna perused Griff’s extensive collection of DVDs for our night’s entertainment.

She came swaggering down the ramp with an impish grin on her face.

“What will it be tonight?” I asked.

“Something a little different,” my daughter notified us as she slid the disc into the player.

After the FBI warning, and whatever else is legally required to appear on screen, I was surprised to hear the overture to Camelot begin. It had been quite a while since any musical had been played in our house, and I was even more surprised that she’d found it in Griff’s collection. I turned to Jamie.

“I wouldn’t think Griff would have this,” I remarked.

Jamie snuggled his chin into my shoulder.

“Generally anything that has swords, or a good fight, or an historical angle,” he observed about his friend’s taste in programming, then kissed me below the ear and down my neck.

“Don’t make me separate the two of you,” Brianna quickly admonished, glancing at us out of the corner of her eye, but I caught the smile on her face and echoed it.

It was hard to believe the sometimes sullen young woman I had come to know Brianna as was also this happy, bubbling bright spot. I don’t know how, but Jamie had brought forth a Brianna I hadn’t seen in years – one that I missed more than I knew. Jamie gave me a squeeze as Bree began to sing along, her best Guinevere and her best voice ringing out loud.

For the entire first act, Brianna was fully engaged, and singing off and on, but as the night wore on,
she settled onto the couch, and became a more passive viewer. Jamie and I both watched as she slowly curled into a ball and fell fast asleep. We stayed put until Camelot had finished, but neither of us could bring ourselves to wake her. Jamie collected a throw blanket and I took Bree’s shoes off. We tucked her in, and for quite some time, we just stood there, watching our baby girl sleep.

“It’s…quite something to see, her sleeping.”

“You say that like you’ve seen her sleeping before.”

“I have – this afternoon…she nodded off in the truck - I coudna bear to wake her then either. She woke on her own, but those few moments…”

“I’ve felt that way from the first time I saw her sleeping – that little curl of her cheek that I saw on your sleeping face so many times. She kept you alive for me.”

Without another word, Jamie drew me off to our bedroom and gently had his way with me. For the first time ever, all three of us were happily under the same roof, sleeping.

~~~~~

I didn’t know Brianna’s class schedule, but I was pretty sure she didn’t have any classes in the eight o’clock hour. I told Jamie not to wake her too early as we went to the kitchen for breakfast, but I needn’t have bothered. We found Bree shoveling coffee into the French press and boiling a kettle on the stove when we got there. She looked sleepy and a little disheveled, but I couldn’t help notice the slight smile on her lips that just seemed to linger there. Bree wasn’t a big smiler – she smiled when there was a reason, but seldom as a state of being.

“Hey you two,” she brightly greeted us, “Coffee?”

“I’ll get the kettle,” Jamie informed her as it was on the verge of whistling – a sound I know he finds annoying.

There were plenty of bannocks left over from last night, so we would all be quite well fortified to make it through the day without a grumbling stomach, or so I was assured multiple times by both Jamie and Brianna.

“Classes today?” I casually asked between sips and nibbles.

“Um…not this week – office hours with the prof. for those who need more direction.”

“And you doona need…directing?” Jamie asked, smirk sneaking up his face.

“Not in my classwork,” Brianna affirmed.

“That’s good to know,” I offered, “…I mean that you’re doing alright…after all I’ve sprung on you this semester…”

I looked down and sighed, suddenly stuck inside my own mind, flashes of her first meeting with Jamie and my subsequent conversations about time travel and true love, and how that must have affected her, striking me out of the blue.

I came out of what felt like a trance when I felt Jamie’s hand on my forehead. He was crouched down in front of me looking quite concerned.

“Sorry,” I offered, “I guess I just realized how much I truly…dropped on you,” I croaked to
Brianna.

She took my hand.

“First you hit me with a two by four? Remember? To get my attention?” Bree turned to Jamie. “It’s something she used to say to me – that the only way she could get through to me sometimes would be to hit me over the head…metaphorically, of course.”

“Of course,” Jamie replied.

“You know there was no other way to get me to believe all of this – don’t you?” she said again to me. I nodded. “Good – now don’t be late to work on my account,” Brianna lightly admonished, then kissed me on the forehead.

I felt a sense of absolution, my guilt set free, and off to work I went.

~~~~~
Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter took so long to complete. I started renovating Lallybroch on graph paper, and found the drawings in the Companion book are only feasible if the residents can fly and walk through walls! But I think you will enjoy what Brianna does with her ancestral home further down the line...(Hey, wait, is that a spoiler?)

Once Under A Mattress

Bree watched happily as Claire headed out to catch her train to the hospital. She stood looking out the sidelights of the front door, mug of coffee held in her palms, realizing she was doing what her mother had done for years – seeing her loved one off, but keeping an eye on her for as long as possible.

“Did your mam go, then?” Jamie asked.

Brianna sighed and nodded.

“She loves her job,” Bree commented with a smile.

“Aye, she’s always had a passion for helping others – and thankfully for me, the skill to go along with it. Her healing touch saved me more than once.”

“You got hurt a lot?” Brianna asked, looking over her shoulder at Jamie.

“To be sure, but…she saw me through…even when I didn’t think I wanted to live.”

Bree’s eyes darkened, looking sharply at Jamie for his words.

“There were some dark times…for both of us.”

“I guess…I forget, seeing the way you two are together, that there must have been…a lot of sadness. I mean…I don’t know what I mean. It just seems to me…the times you lived in…when you first met – I don’t think I could have lived at a time where you were in constant peril.”

“Is it really all that different now? People can steal your money with the push of a button without you ever having set eyes on them! Battles are still fought over whose religion has the better God – and nowadays, should someone think you an idiot, they post it to the internet instead of saying it to your face and giving you the chance to regain your honor! It’s just a different kind of peril.”

Bree smiled at his observations.

“You do have a point,” Brianna responded, “Well…should we get to work too?”

“Aye,” Jamie said as a released breath, “Are ye up for putting the frame together with me?”

“Try to stop me – I am so excited to see how it looks in the room!”

“You and me both.”
Jamie looked longingly at Brianna, so wishing to hug her, and he could see the want of physical contact, but also the restraint Bree was placing on herself. Overcoming the inertia was still too difficult. Serious emotion still froze her in place and scared her to the core.

Bree cradled the coffee mug in both hands, blue eyes staring into their creator. Jamie cracked a one-sided smile, still holding her gaze. He could see that she wanted to hug him, and that was enough of a step in the right direction.

~~~~~

Artemis Gordon was quite happy to see the pair of them.

“Some things have arrived for you – looks like the mattress and a few other things. How’s the time table for completion looking?”

“We should be able to get it all done – we still have ‘til Halloween,” Brianna declared.

“So, your parents had a spook wedding? Did everyone come in costume?”

“Not really, and I think he wants to celebrate the day they met, not the day they got married.”

Jamie overheard Bree trying to explain things to Mr. Gordon, and interceded.

“I would say the day Claire and I met was as life altering as the day we wed – she tended to my injuries…” Jamie paused, counting on his fingers the things she did for him. “three times before she even knew my name for sure. I wouldna have survived until our wedding day, nor would there have been one had we met any other way. No, the day I met Claire…changed the path of my life.”

“This Claire of yours, she must be some woman. I’d love to meet the woman who evokes such… love and loyalty.”

“If all goes well, she may just seek you out to thank you!” Jamie quipped, slapping the man across the back.

Brianna stood listening, first feeling warmed by Jamie’s obvious love for her mother, and then being rightfully mortified at his joke with sexual overtones.

~~~~~

Jamie asked Mr. Gordon if they could borrow a few tools needed for the assembly of the frame, and he easily agreed. By now he was pretty sure Jamie would sooner bite off his own hand than not live up to an agreement he had made, so he held no qualms in allowing the Frasers to take a pair of rubber mallets, a level, a small hand plane and a collection of files and rasps for fine tuning the fit of the pieces, and it also meant Artemis would get to see them at least one more time. He had grown very fond of the pair, and was already feeling the strains of separation.

Bree ducked out to the jeep when Jamie took their wood-working savior into his arms to thank him once more. She didn’t want to be put in the awkward situation of refusing to hug. She liked Mr. Gordon, but if she couldn’t hug her own father, there was no way she could put her arms around someone who was even more of a stranger.

“Where’d that girl of yours slip away to?”

“I think she was afraid of getting hugged – she’s…skittish – shies from contact.”
“Och, I noticed there was something. That must be it. Tell her how glad I’ve been to make her acquaintance, and that either of you are welcome – and I will not try to hug her, unless you think that would make her even more uncomfortable!”

“It probably would, but I’m sure she’ll be around – we’ve still got the glassware and half the other items for the room to collect.”

~~~~~

Before the door on the jeep had fully closed, Brianna had turned toward Jamie.

“I’m sorry…I know it seemed rude to just walk out…”

“Ye did what you had to – I would never ask you to compromise your comfort for the sake of politeness, and if others canna understand, it is their problem – Mr. Gordon was more concerned than anything else.”

“I guess I’m not very good at being Scottish,” Bree confessed.

“But you’re good at being you, and that’s what matters.”

Bree attempted to smile.

“Thank-you,” she softly stated.

~~~~~

Jamie and Brianna collaborated on carrying the sections of posts, and all the rest of the frame parts, into the old, downstairs kitchen. It was hard to believe the junk strewn, dust laden trap of a room they had started with was now move in ready. It had actually been a while since Brianna had even been in the room, and she walked around marveling at all Jamie had gotten done. The window panes were clean and letting in double the light, casting a shadow across the currently pristine floor. Brianna turned slowly around as she looked from the floor to the ceiling.

“It’s so beautiful,” she cried as she ran her hand across and down the fireplace, brushing her hand along the raised hearth.

“How long did the two of you live at Le-och?” she double queried.

“Not all that long, really…but, a number of the early hurdles of our marriage were tackled in a chamber much like this…You see, your mam…she didna wed me outta love…but I couldna see myself with anyone else. We were…still gettin’ to know one another, and were very much on the outs when we arrived at Leoch.” Jamie exhaled deeply, looking around appreciably at the memories that those other walls held.

“When we found our way back to each other…I knew that whatever feelings she started with were becoming…love. So to me, our chamber at Leoch was the place where our union truly began.” Jamie let out another deep breath, and a little sigh escaped.

“Do you realize your accent gets stronger when you talk about the past?” Brianna probed.

Jamie smiled broadly, the entire array of his teeth on display.

“Do I now?” he replied in an extremely exaggerated burr. “I guess you’re lucky I doona ruminate in Gaelic!”
Bree put her hand on the front of Jamie’s shoulder and smiled. Jamie’s smile went from broad and toothy to heartfelt and eye-crinkling.

“My arms will be open to ye whenever you’re ready,” he confessed.

“I know.”

~~~~~

With all the bed frame pieces spread out in order on the floor, they began to put it together. They assembled the posts first. They just fit below the ceiling, with one of them dragging just the slightest bit as they tilted it vertical. Since it filled most of the vertical space between the two posts, they slid the headboard panels between the two posts at the head of the bed first. Set in place, the headboard stood head high as Jamie and Brianna stood next to it, covering most of the wall, but the posts were still a foot or more taller. Of the tools they had borrowed, only the rubber mallets had been needed to nudge a couple of reluctant pieces into place, and before they could fathom it, the frame stood before them in its entirety.

“That is so impressive,” Brianna whispered reverently, walking along the width of it.

“I couldna have done it without you, you know.”

“You did most of the work. I didn’t do anything, really.”

“But you…had a hand in it. I’m not sure I would have…done so well had you not participated. I am…so proud to have worked side by side with you. You did more than you know…you showed trust in me when I had yet to earn it. That means the world to me.”

Bree shyly smiled and dragged her toe on the floor in an arc, her hands clutched behind her back.

~~~~~

While Brianna trekked up to the modern kitchen to get a drink, Jamie continued working, placing several wide slat sections into place to support the mattress. Stained the same color as the frame, the futon-inspired support system seemed to disappear once it was in place. Jamie walked the tightly rolled mattress over and sat on the slats while he unwrapped the subdued, supple creation. Protective plastic removed, the mattress was secured in four places down the cylinder with synthetic twine. Jamie took his pocket knife out and proceeded to snap them apart at a time, leaving one near the middle intact as the last. He supported the mattress, bending down to cut the final tie, expecting it to calmly unfurl once he sliced it free. It popped open, almost dancing on one heel, as it whirled like a gyroscope, and opened like popcorn hitting an open flame, knocking Jaime down flat and landing half on top of him on the bed frame.

Brianna came back from her refreshment pause, and looked around, not seeing Jamie at first, and then jumping as the mattress seemed to be trying to rise to its feet.

“ELP”, the muffled plea came from beneath the mattress, one large hand clawing from around the side.

Bree moved quickly to pull the wayward mattress off her father. She grabbed the top of it and folded it back to reveal a quite chagrinned Scotsman.

“I didna know the thing was alive! There should be a warnin’ label,” he exclaimed, Brianna putting her hand over her mouth to laugh behind it.
“You think it’s funneh? I coulda suffocated! And who’d be laughin’ then?...Your mam’d be none too pleased...and to lose me in this manner!”

“You mean, live by the mattress, die by the mattress?” Brianna joked, then gasped at her own joke and turned bright pink.

Jamie’s red-faced anger at the mattress became red-faced shock, and then joy at discovering Brianna did have that kind of sense of humor that he and her mother had parried about with so often.

“Oh, lass, you may not ha’ some Scottish traits, but, the humor, for sure, survived.”

~~~~~

After wrestling the mattress cover up the sides and zipping it closed, they placed the now saffron yellow covered sleeping pad on its base and each released a deep breath after a hard fought job done well. Jamie jumped backward, seeming to float back first down to the mattress, his feet crossed and hands tucked supportively behind his neck as he landed. Bree smiled at his ability to land so gently despite his size and density.

The angle of the light coming in through the windows suddenly caught her attention. “It’s later than I thought,” she alarmed. “I’ll check if we left any evidence,” she declared, heading out of the old kitchen. Bree caught a flash of movement and quickly closed the door.

“Mom, you’re home!?” she sharply vocalized, hoping to both warn Jamie and catch her mother off guard.

“Yes…I was hoping to join you in whatever you and Jamie were watching.”

“We were just about to come up and put together something to eat...join me?” Bree asked as she hooked her elbow around Claire’s and began gently dragging her away from both the media room AND the Leoch room.

Claire looked back over her shoulder, but another tug on her elbow from Brianna redirected her attention.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Jamie?” Claire questioned, looking up at the side of Brianna’s carefully controlled face. She smiled as she realized Bree had inherited Jamie’s inscrutable masking technique.

“He’ll be up soon,” was Brianna’s reply. “So, how was your day, Mom?”

Still smiling, Claire leaned her head against Bree’s shoulder.

“This was one of those good days. I got to see four children go home with their parents, and the parents provided me with the kind of payment money will never deliver.”

~~~~~

Brianna calmly ambled to her apartment and climbed the stairs. After a second dinner with her parents, and another successful day of working shoulder to shoulder with Jamie, Bree placidly walked into the common room of her apartment. The Cheshire cat grin on her face striking her other roommates with surprise.

“Since when do you smile?” roomie one commented as Bree alit on the couch. Bree didn’t answer,
just exhaled.

“Wait a minute, when you left here yesterday morning you were wearing these exact clothes – You haven’t been home! You spent the night with someone, didn’t you? No wonder you’re smiling!” roomie two rejoiced.

Whooping and hollering commenced among the roomies.

“You finally gave it up? Who’s the lucky guy?” “Or was it a girl? Is that what took you so long?”

“Stop it,” Bree called out, still unable to stop smiling despite her roommates accusations.

“I was at my parent’s – I fell asleep, that’s all there is to it. I’ve been getting to know my dad.”

“So you were calling someone ‘daddy’, huh, Bree?”

Bree was in such a good mood, nothing they could say was going to get her riled up, and that just convinced them further that they were right about where she’d spent the previous night.

“Why can’t you just admit it?” roomie one accused.

“Believe what you want,” Bree replied with a shake of her head, “I’ve had a long day. Is the bathroom free? I could really use a shower.”

Brianna stood and stretched, sighing at several stiff muscles. She headed off to collect her robe and shed her shoes in her room, and let her virtues be questioned. The giggling of her roommates rang out behind her as she left. They clearly didn’t believe her assertions of continued innocence, but Bree knew the truth.

~~~~~

As they relaxed in bed, Claire pulled Jamie’s big paw of a hand into her two hands and slowly smoothed her fingers over his skin.

“I’ve always loved your hands,” she hummed. “And now they’re as beautiful as I’ve even seen them,” she waxed as she continued to run her hands over the contours of his.

“Glad ye still enjoy them, Sassenach, for I verra much like putting them on ye.”

His free hand curled around Claire’s waist, anticipating the further application of his hands to her body. Claire pulled his hand in close to her chest and held it still against herself.

“When I came home this evening, Brianna wasn’t coming out of the media room. She was quite subtle, but…I saw her closing a door behind herself. You’ve gotten her involved in whatever it is you’re making for me, haven’t you? The surprise you mentioned a while back?”

Mirroring the face Brianna had deployed earlier that evening, Jamie held his tongue and kept his composure, simply pulling her a little tighter to his body.

“That’s brilliant, you know. Bree will rise to a challenge the same way she pushes away what seems to be foisted upon her. You made her come to you.” Claire turned in his arms and looked into his eyes.

Jamie was fighting it hard, but the smile won out, and he happily puffed with joy.

“And that’s why neither of you would talk about your shopping trip, isn’t it?”
Jamie was absolutely bursting, knowing if he didn’t tell Claire something of his time with Brianna, he would lose his mind.

“She’s something else, our lass. She had me in tears laughing,” Jamie began volunteering.

“She thought…” Jamie chuckled just remembering Bree’s words, “She thought I’d be armed because…”

Laughter just spilled out of him, and Claire started to laugh too, not even knowing why.

“We were headed into ‘unfamiliar territory’!”

“What?” Claire giggled.

“It was outside our normal realm, so she thought I’d want to protect her – the innocence of it… What have ye told the lass about me and the times we lived in?”

“Well, there was a time when you’d not have gone anywhere without having a weapon, but I never told her that!”

“It’s alright, though. I wouldn’a have traded the look on her face.”

“So, you admit you’ve recruited our daughter into your secret?” Claire wheedled.

Jamie placed a gentle kiss on her lips. Claire grabbed his head.

“She is letting you in, so whatever you’re up to, keep it up.”

She pulled him down for a kiss, and his hands got to do the wandering they had wanted to do.

~~~~~
Several days passed without Brianna coming to the house, and I could see the effect it was having on Jamie. But it was hopeless to try to get him to tell me what was going on between them. They had been growing so close, or so I thought, over these last few months, so I hoped nothing had gone wrong. Brianna’s and my birthday were on the horizon, and I was very much hoping we could celebrate both birthdays as a family.

Jamie was still spending much of his time in the locked room next to the media room. I tried the door several times, but he kept it locked whenever he wasn’t in it, and for the life of me, I could not figure where he was hiding the key. He knew I was beginning to lose patience as to what his surprise might be, but he continued to be inscrutable.

Almost every evening, a dessert of some kind was awaiting me – all hand made by Jamie as he practiced several recipes over and over. After a week of this treatment, I was like a Pavlovian dog, almost unable to contain my taste buds. It was delicious torture, but I wondered if he had thrown himself into a baking frenzy the way Brianna did when something was troubling her.

~ ~ ~ ~

“Happy almost Birthday, Mom,” Brianna cawed into the phone.

“Good morning, sweetie, and thank-you. Just a few days…and I’m…fifty,” Claire gulped.

“Don’t worry, Mom, you never act your age anyway.”

After a short silence, where Bree could almost hear her mother’s cheeks blush, Claire resumed her rumination -“I find it quite difficult to believe it’s been twenty years since I first held you.”

“You do realize you say some variant of that phrase every year, don’t you?” Brianna asked.

“And it’s true every year…Um, Bree?”

“Yeah?”

“You and Jamie didn’t have a disagreement or something, did you?”

“No…why?”

“Well, you haven’t been here in a few days, and Jamie…well he seems a bit sad.”

“No, we’re fine…it’s just, we’ve spent a lot of time together recently, my classes are gearing up, and require my attention, and…um…I…I needed some time. I’m not used to it – he’s been wonderful,” her voice cracked, “But…”
The suppressed crying was clear in her voice even over the phone.

“I understand,” Claire soothed. “I’m proud of how far you’ve come with him, and I know how happy you are making him. He probably needs some time, too.”

“I’ll be back around soon,” Bree promised. “It is my turn to pick our birthday restaurant…is… Jamie coming with us?”

Claire wasn’t sure how to interpret Brianna’s tone.

“We spoke about that briefly – he wants us to continue any ‘tradition’ we might have established, but by the way he’s been baking this past week or so, I think he wants us to have cake together.”

“I’d…I’d like that too…it’s the first time we can celebrate…as a family,” Brianna affirmed.

She could almost hear her mother’s smile through the phone.

“I’m glad you feel that way, Bree sweetie.”

“So, is Friday good for you? I know it doesn’t split the difference like we usually do, and I know you usually power-down after a long week at work.”

“I’ve, well, um, had good reason to stay alert once the work week is done lately.”

“Mom! You could have just said Friday was good!”

“Sweetie, you’re turning twenty – you are no longer a child I need to try to hide things from. Your father makes me feel alive when I used to only live for you and work. Be happy for me?”

“Of course I’m happy for you…that doesn’t mean I want to hear details…so, I’ll see you Friday?”

“Will you come a little early…so Jamie can see you?”

“Sure,” she said to her mom, knowing full well she intended to be there all day to help Jamie continue to set up the Leoch room.

~~~~~

“Your Mam is really getting herself worked up over what her surprise might be – she’s known from the start I was working on something for her. I suspect she thinks it’s a birthday gift.”

Brianna smiled broadly.

“You know, she’s…afraid we’ve had a falling out because I haven’t been here in a few days.”

Jamie smiled to her in return.

“That’d be my fault,” Jamie admitted. “Spending time with you…it…makes me feel…I waited so long to…”

“I understand,” Bree responded with a nod.

“Of course you do,” Jamie happily toned.

In Brianna’s absence, Jamie had collected more of the deliveries that had been shipped to Mr. Gordon’s shop. Brianna had returned the mallets and other assorted tools to the woodshop, feeling
apologetic about ducking out on a ‘proper’ goodbye, and managed a handshake and a warm smile for Artemis. She all but apologized for her inability to be demonstrative, but thanked the man sincerely for all he did in helping her find a relationship with her father. His assertion that she mustn’t be a stranger left her secure that she’d done the right thing in coming back to see him without Jamie. She’d set things right on her own terms, and it felt like a big accomplishment – a step toward being a complete person, someone who could function in the real world.

“I saw that you’d picked these up from the shop,” Bree commented as she fingered the curtains that now surrounded the bed.

“You’ve been to the shop, then?” Jamie queried as he worked to place candles in just the right locations around the hearth and throughout the room.

“I took back the tools, and I thanked Mr. Gordon for everything – but you know that, don’t you? He told you everything I did and every word I said,” she stated as she sat by the small table and crossed one knee over the other and raised an eyebrow in Jamie’s direction.

“He was very excited to tell me, again, what a wonderful child I have in you.”

Jamie came and sat opposite her at the table, leaning his elbows down on the table top as he leaned in.

“I didn’t like the way I left things…skulking out like a coward. I don’t want that to be the impression I make…so I corrected it.”

Jamie beamed proudly across the table until Brianna blushed.

“I love you,” Jamie relayed to his daughter, who he was still afraid to address by name face to face, something that made him feel cowardly.

“I think I love you too…and it scares the hell outta me – I know it shouldn’t,” she quickly qualified, shaking her head back and forth.

“If it didna scare ye, lass, at least a little, I’d know it wasn’t true. Opening or giving your heart to anyone…it takes courage.”

Jamie put his hand out and Brianna clasped it.

~~~

Knowing what time Claire meant to be home tonight, Jamie and Brianna stopped working on the room early so Bree could change for her birthday dinner out with her mother. The newly twenty year old Fraser got herself gussied up for an early autumn evening out in Boston. The weather had held out nicely this year, and there was still a summery air about, thankfully, so a parka needn’t be part of the wardrobe, as had been necessary previous years. Bree tentatively walked down the side ramp into the media room. Jamie heard her footsteps and his head came up and turned, watching her come down into the seating pit.

Her crushed panne leggings seemed to change color as the light struck them – like the feathers of an Australorps hen, switching from true black to iridescent shades of green and purple. A mid-thigh length short sleeve tunic in a purple and green pattern traced her long torso, making her upper body seem as long as her legs.

“I’ve never seen ye in something so fancy – you clean up nice,” he lightly commented.
“It’s not like we’re going somewhere with a dress code, but…it’s something we’ve done since I was little, getting dressed up for our birthday dinner – it made it special…and this year is even more special, because we’re not alone anymore.”

Jamie was fighting his tears, and failing. He couldn’t even stand up he was so weighted down with emotions. He took her hand and strongly kissed the back of it, keeping his face pressed to her hand for quite a long time.

“You’re gonna make me cry,” Brianna croaked, “And I don’t want to have to explain my tears to mom.”

Jamie came up smiling through his tears.

“Aye,” was all he could think to say.

As Brianna and Jamie slowly made their way up to the main floor, Bree asked, “So, where are you hiding the cake?”

Jamie turned quickly, eyes wide open.

“Mom says you’ve been plying her with cake every night, and you’d have to really rush to make something while we’re at dinner, so…”

“You are such the clever one.”

“And you’re not going to tell me, are you? OK, but it better taste like heaven, or I’m going to be really disappointed, and so will mom.”

“What will I be disappointed with?” Claire’s voice rang out as she appeared and followed Jamie and Brianna into the modern kitchen.

“Oh, sweetie, you look so nice tonight,” she complimented, giving Bree a quick kiss on the cheek and a one armed squeeze around the back.

“I was trying to get him to show me the cake, but he’s feigning innocence,” she accused, leaning her head pointedly toward Jamie.

“Oh?” Claire questioned, moving to get a hug and kiss from Jamie. He beamed back at her, and released a deep breath with a bit of a growl.

Claire stared at Jamie, trying to see if she could make him give anything away. His expression never changed.

“I could stare for hours, and still never know what he’s thinking,” Claire stated, turning to look at Brianna. “Although, the staring in and of itself…quite enjoyable.”

Jamie’s face turned bright red, as did the tips of his ears. He dipped his head, unable to bring his blushing under control.

Unseen by both her parents, Brianna’s face and ear tips did the same thing as Jamie’s, and she, too, was fighting to get her galvanic response under control.

“Ohhh, did I embarrass you,” Claire teased. She put a finger under his chin and lifted his head up until he was looking her in the eye. “Ogling is a two way street. Did our wedding night not teach
you that?"

“Aye, it did,” he nodded in acknowledgement.

“Should we reschedule?” Brianna asked, “I mean, if you two want to…”

“You two have plans,” Jamie pronounced, looking from Claire to Brianna and back. “You should have your dinner… I’ll be here when you get back.”

“Should we save room for cake?” Claire inquired.

The one-sided smile crept up Jamie’s face.

“I would.”

~~~~~

Claire got changed quickly, and looked quite glamorous and quite delectable by the look she elicited from Jamie.

“We’ll be back in a couple of hours,” Claire hummed in Jamie’s ear as she pulled back from his embrace.

“Take your time,” he advised, taking her hand and reaching out for Brianna’s. He escorted his girls to the door, one on each hand. They both looked back at him as they crossed the threshold, for a moment standing in a triangle formation. He gave each of their hands a tight squeeze, then released them to their night out.

Once he knew they were safely away, Jamie headed back to the modern kitchen, and removed the cake layers from their hiding places. Each cake level was about four inches tall, with the largest one being approximately six inches across. He slathered a mousse-y chocolate frosting between the layers of dark chocolate cake and waited for the tower to set up. Once it seemed secure, Jamie began the outer frosting – actually a white chocolate ganache that poured over the whole thing, like a shiny volcanic outpouring. Just before it solidified, Jamie took a toothpick and traced off-set lines into the ganache to emulate the division of stones in his tower of cake – an edible Broch Turach.

Jamie stood back and admired his creation. There was just one thing left to do to complete his tower of cake. A conical candle was placed atop it, representing the thatched roof cover, and, when lit, the candle would also represent one more thing for Jamie – the first year he could celebrate both Claire’s and Brianna’s birthdays, and know that both the love of his life, and the child they’d made, were alive and safe, and part of his life.

~~~~~

After a nice dinner, and leisurely stroll through Harvard Square, Claire and Brianna found their way back to the red line T station, and headed back to Griff’s house, both anticipating the dessert that promised to be awaiting them.

Jamie had been using the time remaining after he finished the cake to set the scene, and the table. A pot of warm tea, and a carafe of coffee sat steeping among the three perfect place settings of cake plates and utensils. He had draped the table in an autumnal color, and all looked sumptuous.

Jamie heard voices echoing in the foyer, and lit the conical candle atop the cake tower, waiting for his girls to see his efforts.
“Jamie?” Claire called out.

“Kitchen,” his voice boomed in return, and he released a deep breath, relieved they were home.

Bree and her mother were chatting quietly as they came into the kitchen and saw what Jamie had done for them.

“Oh, Jamie,” Claire whispered, looking at the table and then shifting her eyes to Jamie.

“Wow,” Brianna breathed. “I should have known you could do that after…” Brianna trailed off before she could let anything slip.

Claire cast a glance at her with one eye, but both Brianna and Jamie had the same look on their faces.

“Happy birthdays,” He reverently wished. “Shall we?”

They sat around the table, admiring the details.

“What’s the one candle for?” Bree asked.

“My first chance to celebrate birthdays with the two of you – a first of many, taing do dhia.”

She smiled at him as the warmth filled her chest. His voice always richened when he spoke Gaelic, like it was coming straight from his heart, and it resonated deep within her soul.

“A cake broch?” Claire chortled.

“Aye,” Jamie replied with the tilt of his head and a nod. He leaned in toward Claire and enunciated carefully as he said, “A Chocolat Broch Turach.”

Claire blushed and hummed in delight.

“OK… I’m missing something here,” Brianna promulgated.

Jamie broke the gaze he shared with Claire.

“At my ancestral home, Lallybroch, there is a tower, a broch. It is an ancient structure, even older than the house itself. Someday I’ll show it to you.”

~~~~~

The three of them enjoyed cake and coffee and tea, and each other’s company, feeling as if time was standing still around them. Brianna wished it could go on forever, but bigger and bigger yawns were overtaking her face.

“Should I set a room up for you?” Claire asked.

Bree shook her head, trying to shake off the sleep and the suggestion.

“No, I really shouldn’t stay… My roommates might start auctioning off my belongings, and if I don’t get back, they give me the third degree about where I’ve been and with whom.”

“Those roommates of yours…” Jamie began, “they doona seem… the best kind of people to live with. We have plenty of room. Would you not consider…”
He looked longingly at the daughter he wished to know better and make up lost time with.

Bree shook her head again.

“...can’t. I’ve just gotten used to being on my own, and they aren’t really that bad. They’re just... very... open. But I think I need people like that in my life. They keep things interesting.”

Jamie nodded in understanding.

Claire walked to the door with Brianna in silence until they reached the door. She smiled proudly at her daughter, and they both laughed lightly.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, mom. He’s not too disappointed...that I didn’t want to move in?”

“He understands. I think he just wishes he’d found us when you were still a little girl, instead of the grown woman you are. He has so much love to give, and he wants to shower you with every bit of it. The smile on his face when I got home this afternoon said it all. Thank-you for coming over early.”

Bree pulled her mom into her arms and hugged her tight.

“Give him a hug for me,” she asserted.

“Of course,” Claire responded, closing her eyes to keep from crying.

~~~~

As soon as Brianna was out of sight, Claire fleetly walked back into the kitchen and wrapped her arms tightly around Jamie.

“Is something wrong?” he breathed into her ear.

“No, I’m just trying to relay this hug from your daughter with the same intensity it was meant to have.”

Chapter End Notes

I know it’s taking me longer to complete new chapters, but I've reached that 'fill in the blanks' stage of the writing, where major plot lines are set, but I'm trying to get the details right. During the completion of this chapter, I hit the 300th total page of the work, which means more than half of what I've written is still to come, but those little pieces that tie it all together can be elusive, and they come when they want to, not when you want them to.
Thought I'd post this chapter for a bit of timely content - Samhain was an important date in the lives of Jamie and Claire, so happy Halloween to my readers. Luckily we've reached a point where I have "most" of several chapters ready - just a little tweaking to make them ready for reading. Writing as fast as I can!!!!

In the two remaining weeks before Jamie was to reveal the Leoch room to Claire, there were many little details to be taken care of. Bree and Jamie’s time together was curtailed by her classes increased intensity as the semester wore on, but she made sure to see him as much as possible, and he promised not to become overly sullen when she was unavailable for a stretch of more than two days.

They collaborated on the decoration of the Leoch room down to the last detail, and finally, the day before their deadline was up, both agreed the room was perfect. Jamie laid a fire and lit it for a test run of the chimney, and for how much warmth it would throw off. Bree checked to see how the curtains around the bed operated, and happily stroked a fleecy blanket Jamie had found on his own.

“This is new,” Bree alerted.

Jamie looked over to see what she was talking about.

“Oh? Aye – It reminded me a fur we once slept under – almost as nice to the touch as… nevermind.”

Bree smiled and blushed and could see Jamie doing the same out of the corner of her eyes.

After an appropriate time for both to regain their composure, they toured the room.

“I think she’s gonna love it,” Brianna informed her father. “I feel like…I’ve stepped back in time – It’s…it’s…it is perfect. I hope someday…”

“What?” Jamie inquired, seeing an expression on Bree’s face he’d never seen.

“I just hope someday I find someone willing to go to such lengths for me…and that I can… reciprocate.”

“Oh, lass, as young as you are, a time will come – as me Da told me – when the right one comes along, you know it, you feel it, and you willna be able to deny it…reciprocation will come naturally.”

She tucked a stray strand of hair back over her ear in a nervous movement.

“Even as screwed up as I am?”
Jamie unexpectedly grabbed Bree around each upper arm with his hands, and looked directly into her eyes.

“You are not screwed up. You are perfect as you are, and the right man – the right man will see who you are in an instant.”

They pressed foreheads together at Brianna’s instigation.

“Thank-you,” she barely vocalized.

Jamie slowly nodded, biting his bottom lip to control its desire to quiver.

~~~~~

With the pressure of completing the room finally extinguished, Brianna and Jamie would soon once more do what they intended to do during Bree’s visits – watch TV. But Jamie had one more duty to perform before he took Claire into the Leoch room.

They sat in the media room, Jamie sitting right next to Brianna this time, and taking her hands in his.

“As part of celebrating the anniversary of the day your mother and I met, I am planning to ask her to marry me again, and while I am not asking your permission, I would like your blessing, if you feel you can give it,” Jamie said, looking quite hopefully into Brianna’s eyes.

She smiled and teared up.

“I wondered what was taking so long for you two to make it official again,” Bree quipped, “Even I can see it…you two belong together. You have my blessing.”

“So…you think she’ll say yes?” Jamie asked.

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“Well…a lot has happened in my life since I sent your mother away…I…doona ken if you noticed, when my second wife came up – “

“Oh, I noticed…I think there are a few things you need to know – things my mom should tell you, but I don’t think she ever will – about your second wife.”

Jamie tilted his head, wondering what Bree could tell him about a time in his life Claire was not a part of, and Brianna should not be aware of.

“After you left that night…I asked her about Laoghaire. Mom has good reason to hate her; things she never shared with you.”

“And she told you?”

“She couldn’t have held it in if she tried. She was so angry, even after two hundred and fifty years,” Brianna cheekily revealed.

“When the magic charm Laoghaire left under your bed didn’t work, she really went to the dark side. She’s the one who…maneuvered mom into the situation where she taken as a witch, and she testified against mom at the trial…When she was telling me, I’d never seen her so filled with rage, except one other time.”
Jamie’s face was drawn.

“I knew, actually, but not until my marriage to Laoghaire had exploded in my face. Claire and I have never spoken of it, but perhaps she needs to know the entire story…Thank-you. I wondered if keeping it buried was the wiser choice, but after what ye’ve told me, it’s a secret that should not be kept any longer. But I am in a quandary as to how it should be revealed.”

“I’m sure you’ll find the right words.”

Jamie nodded.

“Aye…Now what it is ye’ve brought for us to watch this time?”

Brianna blushed.

“I hope you don’t think it’s too childish…it’s a cartoon, but…I kinda saw myself in one of the characters…” And giving a sly look at Jamie said, “and it’s kinda the way I thought my life would be like if we lived in the past – it was before mom stopped talking about you and the other life she lived.”

~~~~~

After viewing a number of episodes of ‘Jane & the Dragon’ together, Brianna looked apprehensive, and sat clutching her own fingers, waiting for Jamie’s reaction. She’d listened to him as they watched, and was relieved to hear him laugh throughout.

“You saw yourself as Jane, did ye?” Jamie asked.

Bree blushed and nodded, finally looking up into Jamie’s eyes.

“Was I the dragon?” he asked hopefully, liking the protective relationship the two shared.

“Sometimes…but Jane does have a father, he’s just not around…all the time.”

“Aye,” Jamie nodded his understanding. “She’s a good role model, this Jane – not afraid to be who she wanted to be.”

“I often wished I had a group of friends like hers…one more episode?” Bree tentatively asked.

“Why not,” Jamie answered, handing her the remote.

At the end of the next half hour, having viewed an episode where the dragon wants to keep hidden his talent for singing, Brianna turned to Jamie. “So, do you have a secret talent? Can you sing like a nightingale?”

“A nightingale in a woodchipper, maybe, lass. No, just because I was the lead singer in a band by no way means I have a voice fit to be heard – no even in the shower!”

“Wait…you were in a band?” Bree questioned, tilting her head in wonderment.

“Aye…did your mam not tell you…after?”

“After what?” she asked with an incredulous shake of her head.

Jamie started to blush, recalling the night in great detail. He was struggling to find the right words.
“Umm…Fourth of July, your mam brought me back to the apartment, and you were in your room, with the volume turned up…It twas…quite the shock to hear my own voice coming back at me, but there it was.”

Brianna searched his eyes as she searched her mind.

“Threat of Thunder; Threat of Rain…is you?”

“Aye, me and a few other lads,” Jamie answered.

Brianna seemed on the verge of tears, but was having trouble containing her smile.

“I…always…feel better after I listen to that album…Do you…think on some level…I knew? I mean, that it was you?…Even though I can’t understand the words…it’s…like a familiar voice, if that makes sense.”

“Aye, it does,” Jamie smiled and nodded.

“Even though I know you didna have ears yet when your mam brought you to safety, I always hoped you’d know my voice…just because I’m your Da.”

Without either of them looking, their hands found each other and clasped tightly together.

~~~~~

“Brianna brought Jane and the Dragon for you two to watch?”

“Aye,” Jamie answered.

“Well, if I didn’t know it before, you’ve won her over,” I spoke, knowing how truly personal allowing him to watch Jane and the Dragon was for Bree.

“I remember watching it on Saturday mornings when it first aired, Bree letting me hold her, and then letting me tell her about life in 1743 Scotland. She was fascinated with the idea of a sgian dhu, and would walk around the house with a butter knife tucked in her high-tops,” I related, getting a smile and puff of laughing air from Jamie.

“I can see it,” he replied, his eyes sparkling.

“She’d have died a thousand deaths had any of her school friends seen that side of her,” Claire revealed as she turned down the blankets and sat on the open bed, pulling her feet up and tucking them under the covers.

Jamie slithered up the bed on top of the blankets.

“Do you need help undressing for bed tonight?”

“Nah,” he breathily answered, “Just felt like doin’ this.”

Jamie gave me a wonderfully lingering kiss, soothing all the tension out of my body, and I drifted to sleep. It must have been what Jamie intended, for I heard him whisper, “Sweet dreams until tomorrow.”

~~~~~

Samhain 2015
At mid-morning, Jamie received a text from Brianna.

“Good luck tonight, and I won’t call ‘til mid-week…just to be safe.”

A winking smilie-face sat boldly at the end of the message, and made Jamie laugh. His daughter was coming into her own; her personality blooming, her sense of humor being unleashed. Jamie sighed, his heart warmed to the nth degree.

He looked for quite some time at the screen, smiling and nodding, but after a second sigh, he got to work on his ‘invitation’ for Claire - for what good was all his and Brianna’s work on the room, if Claire never made it through the door?

~~~~~

I had managed to get away from the hospital after my Saturday morning consult, arriving back home almost an hour before Jamie was expecting me. I checked the mailbox, and began sorting through the junk mail and whatnot, when the handwriting on one of the envelopes caught my attention – it was Jamie’s hand – I’d know his writing anywhere. I dropped all the other mail into my bag and opened the missive bearing my name.

A thick square slid out into my palm. I unfolded the note and saw the key pressed into a cutout in a piece of foam-core board. The key looked very old, but with current wear marks in several locations. The enfolded note also bore Jamie’s writing, and I slid the foam into my right palm so I could read what he had written. Upon the paper were the words, “Here’s the key, come to me. You know where.”

I took in a deep breath and exhaled raggedly. I freed the key from its backing and looked at it lying in my palm. I curled my hand shut. The old black key was now warm in my hand. My heart was throbbing, and a pleasant warmth alit on each of my cheeks. Jamie’s secret for me was about to be shared – and it was about damn time, too.

~~~~~

I made my way quickly into the foyer, hoping Jamie would be waiting for me, but he was not there. I followed my nose to the kitchen. It was clear something had been prepared there, but the end result was missing, as was Jamie. My hunt through the house continued. I wondered for a moment if perhaps Jamie had locked himself behind that door whose key I now held, but then I heard his toes hitting the steps, sounding like he was taking them two to three at a time coming up from the lower level. The sound of his steps grew louder and then began fading away as the Doppler Effect ran down the hall toward the bedroom.

Jamie clearly did not realize I had arrived home, but there was one night each year that I endeavored to be far from the hospital before nightfall. That night was Halloween. Spirits did seem to run rampant, and I knew full well certain doorways between worlds were opened. I always preferred to be locked safely behind my own door on Halloween, and died a thousand deaths when Brianna wished to go “trick-or-treating”. Fortunately, her desire to walk the streets asking strangers for candy only lasted a few years.

I quietly tip-toed to our bedroom and peered in. Jamie was down on his knees carefully forming pleats. The cloth of his kilt looked crisp and colorful, probably produced with modern dyes, but still quite beautiful. And I couldn’t take my eyes off him. It had once been an everyday happening, watching Jamie pleat, wrap, and belt himself into his kilt, but it came as a rare treat now. I hadn’t
seen him perform this ritual since I left 1745 Scotland behind. I didn’t know how often over the years Jamie had worn his kilt, but he still had a practiced hand, and it left me breathless.

~~~~~~

After watching Jamie wriggle into his kilt, I knew whatever he was planning was very important to him, and that I didn’t wish to do anything that would diminish it in any way. I left the doorway before Jamie could see me, and waited down the hall for him to pass by. Once the coast was clear, I slipped into our bedroom and began pawing through my closet. I wanted something that would immediately catch his eye, but considering where our ‘special’ nights usually ended up, I didn’t wish to make it something difficult to remove, for both our sakes. I was suddenly nervous, a part of me wondering what could be so important to Jamie, although in the back of my mind I couldn’t help thinking…what if he asks me to marry him? Am I ready for that? We are inseparable, whether it’s official or not. I looked myself in the mirror.

I selected an emerald green wrap dress, certainly easy to remove, but certain to elicit one of those smirks Jamie always seemed to aim at me when desire was filling his thoughts. Just the thought of Jamie in his kilt again – I felt nervous and excited, and increasingly aroused.

~~~~~~

I found Jamie in the kitchen. He was checking the stove, placing his hand above each burner to make sure they weren’t hot. Without seeing me, he went to the doors to the patio and checked the lock. He turned with a swing of his kilt, and he stopped, sucking in a breath at the sight of me. I found myself shyly smiling as my body filled with warmth. Jamie walked very slowly toward me.

“You’ve come home early,” he spoke, never breaking eye contact with me.

I was finding it increasingly hard to breathe as he neared me, and I was shaking slightly.

“Did I interrupt something?” I inquired.

“No…just checkin’ that everything was secure.”

I traced my finger down his chest.

“I haven’t seen you dressed like this in a long time.”

“Aye,” he answered with a nod. “And you…” Jamie purred.

I nodded slowly at him.

“Ye’re home early,” he said, knowing he was not telling me anything I did not already know.

“If I’d known you had so much planned, I’d have taken more time getting home.”

“Just chekin’ the locks one last time,” he murmured, unable to keep from repeating himself as he stared at me.

“Making sure we’re safe in case we don’t see the light of day for some time?”

“Aye, can’t be too careful, now can we?”

I revealed the key in my other palm.

“Shall we…go see my surprise?” I asked with an odd harmonic to my voice.
“In a hurry, are we?”

“No…but…I may go stark raving mad.”

“Well, we can’t let that happen – lead the way,” Jamie burred, extending his hand toward the exit from the kitchen.

“Am I right in thinking this room was an old kitchen? I thought I remembered seeing that when Griff gave us the tour.”

He gave me a little squeeze.

We walked slowly, Jamie rubbing up against me in the hall, and guiding me carefully down the stairs, his hands never letting me completely go. When we reached the door that I now had the key for in my hand, Jamie turned my back to it and pressed tightly against me.

“Now, you’re sure you want to know what’s behind that door?”

“You’ve kept me waiting quite some time, Jamie. I am a patient woman, but I’m dying of curiosity,” I declared, placing my open palms on Jamie’s chest, the key dangling from my right pinkie finger. The feel of his shirt brought back sense memories of a million touches, and chill took over my body.

“You’re giving me chills,” I confessed, “I don’t think I can wait any longer.”

He took a step back, allowing me to turn around and place the key into the lock. I giggled with anticipation when it clicked, and looked over my shoulder to see Jamie absolutely beaming at me. I pushed the door before I even looked back, and stepped into the room with my eyes fixed on Jamie.

He guided me across the threshold and pointed with his chin for me to look straight ahead. I was finally in the room. Jamie had been keeping me from this place for what felt like a year, telling me he was preparing a surprise, and that there was a special occasion that needed celebrating. What I hadn’t expected, however, was that he wasn’t making a gift for me in the room, but that the room itself was the gift. I walked across the threshold and stepped back in time.

A roaring fire danced in the fireplace, warming both hearth and room. A massive carved bed stood ceiling high, curtains grading from saffron yellow at the top to deepest burgundy near the floor surrounded it, only the foot end open to peer in and see lavish pillows and blankets. Across the room, under the only window, a small circular table sat, set for dinner for two, a deep window stool held a decanter filled with amber liquid. I was too overwhelmed to take in all the details, but I felt I’d been in this place before.

“Jamie, it’s…”

“As close to the chamber we shared at Leoch as I was able to recreate. I noticed the similarities between the two rooms the first time I stepped in here, though this is a mirror image. I wanted…well…I hoped…Claire, ye stepped into my life and gave me back the use of two arms two hundred and seventy two years ago today. You saved my life, piqued my interest, and stole my heart.”

My eyes were glistening with tears as I ran into Jamie’s arms.

“You are such a romantic,” I gushed, taking his face into my hands and pulling him in for a kiss.

“That’s why you’re wearing the kilt?” I asked with a smirk, stepping back to admire the beauty of him.
“Among other reasons,” he purred in return, rearranging his pleats like a peacock contemplating a display.

“But first things first.” Jamie turned and took two small half-filled glasses off the table. He handed one to me and raised his glass up to the level of my nose.

“To the woman who has given me more that I could have hoped for; who saw to the safety of my heart, the instruction of my body and the salvation of my soul.”

Jamie took my hand, bent his head, and took a deep breath.

“Will ye take my hand again, and be my wife still?”

I actually whimpered with my next breath.

“You doubt I would say yes?” I lightly answered, feeling as if my feet were lifting from the floor.

“No, but…to hear you say it…”

I could feel my cheeks burning and the muscles aching from the smile I was holding on my face.

“Nothing would make me happier. Yes, Jamie, I will marry you.”

Jamie had been holding his face, trying to look serious, but a smile blossomed, and he exhaled in relief and joy. He raised the glass to the full extent of his reach.

“Slainte.”

I repeated after him the one word of Gaelic I was still truly confident in pronouncing.

“Slainte.”

I took a sip from the glass, forgetting for the moment that I had barely touched a drop of alcohol in over twenty years, and not knowing the strength of what I was about to imbibe. I sputtered as I took too big a gulp from the glass Jamie had handed me, and I couldn’t stop coughing, feeling like my throat was on fire and that if I exhaled too strongly I would indeed breathe fire. Jamie quickly put his glass down, and took the one from my hand, replacing it with a water glass he helped me drink from.

“Sorry, Sassenach, I should have warned ye. I took this from one of the casks Griff has been holdin’ for me, and I guess it’s gained in strength…well, it should have considerin’ its age.”

I was still pressing a hand to my chest, hoping I could continue to breathe. I nodded at Jamie and poured half of the water he gave me into the whisky in the other glass, much to Jamie’s dismay.

“Gah, you’ve gone and ruined it now.”

“I can’t drink it full strength, Jamie. I’ve lost my tolerance. And a little water is supposed to open the flavor, so I’ve heard.”

“What prattling praddock told you that?”

“Prattling praddock? Is that even a real word?”

“Och, probably not, but still, how could ye do that to two hundred year old whisky?”
I smirked and blushed, knowing that for him there would never be an acceptable excuse to water down the whisky.

“Sorry,” I said, with a barely opened mouth.

Jamie smiled sheepishly and flicked his eyes up and down the length of my body.

“Just promise to never do it again, Sassenach, Aye?” he purred, half a smile on his lips.

“Give me your hand,” he commanded.

I obliged, extending my right hand to him.

“Not that one.”

I switched it for my left hand and Jamie gently slipped a ring onto my finger. The band was nearly identical to our wedding band from 1743, but a small, square cut diamond sat ensconced upon it.

“I know it wasna the custom, but in this day and age I believe an engagement ring with a precious stone is expected when the marriage contract is made.”

I held my hand up with the other one and admired the ring.

“It’s perfect,” I told him, and kissed him.

~~~~~~~~

We supped on a wonderful stew Jamie had been working on all day. Bit by bit I had become familiar with, and been thrilled by, Jamie’s culinary skills, gathered over his lifetimes. We talked about those first weeks of our original marriage, the early days at Leoch, both the good and the bad, and how glad we both were to have found our way back to each other after the first, and last, time he had ‘disciplined’ me. There was one problem, one person, we were both reluctant to bring up, but I knew we must.

“How many marriages will this make for you?” I asked, knowing where this could lead.

“Counting the first time to you, it will be my fifth.”

“I guess that’s not so many considering how long you’ve lived.”

“Aye, but I stayed available from 1948 on, in case I found ye. I didna want for there to be any reason I couldn’a have ye back.”

I was quiet after hearing that, wondering what would have happened had I shown up in his life during the years he would not have expected me.

“Just ask what ye need to – you know if you found the paper trail of my life, I was married to her for a time.”

My mouth drew in and I glared at Jamie.

“I just can’t understand, knowing what she did, and what she tried to do, how you could marry… her.”

“I wish I had known all she did to you, but ye kept it from me, and so, when Jenny decided it was time to get me married again, Laoghaire didna seem such a bad choice.”
“And how’d that work out for you?” I questioned with an edge to my voice, then gulped down the last of my watered whisky, placing the glass with a heavy thud, and flashing a fearsome glare.

“She shot me,” Jamie reported matter-of-factly.

I was horrified at the simplicity with which he divulged the truth of it.

“That was my third death.”
If ever there was something in my life I regretted, it was marrying Laoghaire. Jenny was hell bent on me not being alone, but I should have known it was a disaster in the making. Laoghaire had thought I was meant to be hers even after I had married Claire, and while it was nearly twenty years after she first felt I should have been hers, I think she thought things had finally been set right. I never loved her, and I think she sensed it.

For whatever reasons and realities of her life, Laoghaire had gone from a lass who desired to be touched by the likes of me, to a slightly older lass, and mother two times over, who cringed if I merely entered the room. ‘Careful what you wish for’ were more than words to her, but rather than admit we were not a fit match, and simply let me go, she became bitter, insisting that I owed her for the path her life had taken.

Our union was short, and anything but sweet, but I was committed to seeing her daughters cared for, so we were still “officially” married long after we were living separately. I would have been glad to keep things that way for the remainder of Laoghaire’s life, but a situation arose that required me to speak to her face to face.

“Why have ye come back?” Laoghaire demanded.

“And what is he doing here?” she added, her nostrils flared and eyes like an angered ram – glassy and irked – as she tilted her head toward Fergus.

“We have a matter to discuss,” I informed her, knowing I was about to toss a rock into a hornet’s nest.

Laoghaire stood defensively in the doorway to her house.

“I have nothing to say to you,” she retorted, and turned to retreat into the house.

I came up on her quickly and put a hand on her shoulder. She whirled on me and pulled free of my touch.

“But I have something you need to hear,” I fired back.

Fergus looked anxious, but I gave him a nod to reassure him. Laoghaire finally let us into the house, but offered neither drink nor food, nor even a chair upon which to rest. Marsali burst in from upstairs, running straight to Fergus, and Joan clung to the last bit of wall by the stairs. She smiled at me, looked to her mother, and crossed herself. While they were not my daughters by blood, they were my girls, none the less.

“Marsali, come away from that thief, this instant,” Laoghaire insisted.

The girl obeyed, but was none too happy to do so.

“I think ye ken why we’re here,” I ventured.

“Aye, and you’ll have no more success in takin’ my daughter to wed this…” she paused, her face scrunching up as she searched her mind for an appropriately insulting word.
“You need not insult the boy any further, and I’m not seeking permission. I’m their father by law. I have every right to approve of Marsali’s marriage to Fergus.”

“You’ll no take either of MY daughters. Law or no, they are my bairns, and I’ll not have you marrying one of them off to a thief twice her age.”

I planted my hands heavily on my hips and tossed a glance skyward.

“Fergus has not been a thief in Marsali’s lifetime. Can you no give up on what he once was? For Christ, woman. The girl has known Fergus her entire life, and is not one to have flights of fantasy, so I believe she knows her own heart.”

“She knows nothing at her age. I was several years older than she when I thought you were meant to be mine. I’ll not have her make the same mistake.”

“The lass knows what she wants, and I’m of a mind to help her to that end.”

“Madame Laoghaire?” Fergus broke in, hat in hand and hook, and head bowed.

“I know I have come before you and asked before, but I do love Marsali, and would see her well cared for, despite what you think of me.”

It was clear Laoghaire’s dander was up. She paced to the fireplace, and turned quickly, withdrawing and cocking a pistol as she did so.

“Girls, go upstairs, NOW!” I called, seeing them scramble, Joan pulling a resistant Marsali up the steps.

“Fergus, I think you should go as well.”

“No, Milord,” he answered, stepping close to my left.

I saw Laoghaire take aim, and I jumped in front of Fergus, pushing him aside as I felt the impact of the ball. I think she had been aiming for Fergus’ heart, but the recoil of the weapon and the height differential between me and the boy meant I was struck in a rather lower area. At first, Laoghaire looked horrified, but it became a satisfied smirk of triumph.

“Serves you right, for it’s your cock that caused this trouble in the first place.”

Fergus tried to come to my aid, but Laoghaire kept him at bay, and ran him from the house. The pain was quite intense, and I hoped I would die soon. I equally hoped I would again wake in the mill stream, reborn yet again. It was a fortunately quick end, for she had managed to sever my femoral artery along with my manhood.

My younger girl, Joan, later told me she’d overheard Laoghaire telling someone that she meant to put a bullet in me should I ever darken her door again, so I would harbor no regrets for what I was about to do to the lass – in fact, I would enjoy it.

~~~~~

That damned water was always so cold, but I knew I was alive again. I crawled onto the bank and collapsed. For a while I stared up at the sky and pondered where my clothing ended up after each of my deaths. I also wondered how I would explain what had just happened. Laoghaire likely thought me dead, as did Fergus, Marsali and Joan, and God knows who else if Fergus had rushed back to Lallybroch. I should have kept out of this situation, and I had reservations about his marriage plans,
but it seems Fergus’ observations about Laoghaire’s behavior had been correct. My financial obligations were never to come to an end. She meant to play the victim, and would make her own daughters spinsters in order to punish me. It was then I decided to use my “death” to my advantage.

~~~~~

As I walked back toward the mill building, I heard the deep inhalation of breath followed by an exhalation of “Oh, good lord”.

I found the nearest bush to step behind before seeing who had come across me naked as I was. I stood there as casually as possible, but felt my eyes go round as I realized who had found me. Lord John Gray was seated upon a white horse, a chestnut brown a few paces behind with a young man aboard that I knew in an instant to be William.

“Have I interrupted something?” he quipped.

“Nah,” I replied.

It seemed an eternity as I stood there.

“Do ye have a spare blanket, by chance?” I finally asked.

“Oh, oh of course,” John sputtered, reaching behind himself and unlashing it from his saddle. He tossed it to me and I hastily wrapped it around my waist and kept my hand clutched in the fabric as I emerged from my sparse cover.

“How did you come to be out here with not a stitch of clothing on?” John asked, a delighted smile painting his face.

I tried to wrangle my thoughts into something I could tell them.

“Um, twas a fight…with me wife…”

“Wife? Oh, that’s right, you did say you remarried, but did that not end quite some time ago?”

“Aye,” I replied rolling my eyes. “It was a mistake that I am now quite ready to rectify, officially.”

The feeling of anger for Laoghaire was hard to maintain as I looked at William, smiling at what a fine young man he appeared to be, and knowing damn well Jenny would take one look at him and know he was mine. I hoped she, as well as all her children, would have the discretion not to say anything in front of the boy.

“Father?” William asked.

My heart jumped, but the boy was not addressing me.

“Yes, William?” John chimed, turning in his saddle.

“Is this the friend you wished me to meet?” his pure voice piped.

“It is. William, this is Jamie.”

William bowed his head momentarily and then nodded back up to look at me. He scanned me quite carefully, looking intimidated if not a bit frightened of me.

“It is good to see you again, William.”
A tinge of fear came up in John’s face.

“We’ve met before?” the boy asked.

“Aye, but it was a long time ago,” was all I said in reply.

I saw John exhale and William nodded, accepting my words.

While we walked the trail between the mill and the house, I explained, with a few notable exceptions, what had transpired with Laoghaire, Joan, Marsali and Fergus this afternoon.

“So, it is likely she believes me dead by her hand, and for the time being I have no intention of dissuading her from such thoughts – but I must explain what happened to Fergus and the girls, and probably my sister by now, so it might be good to let me go in the house before I’m presenting guests.”

“Oh, my, you do have the most extraordinary problems, Jamie. And as engaging as your letters always are, your life is a damn-sight more colorful.”

I laughed and nodded with a broad, drawn smile.

~~~~~

I picked up my pace, arriving back home with a few minutes to explain not only my not being dead, but that Lord John was arriving with his son for a visit, whose reason of which I was not yet sure.

I was nearly knocked over backward as Fergus came running from the house.

“Milord, how can this be? She killed you – I saw her.”

Jenny came out into the yard when she heard Fergus’ excitement.

“You great muckle fool. He told us Laoghaire had killed you.”

“Aye, and she thinks she has as well, but I merely had the…wind knocked out of me.”

“From what I heard, it was not a lack of wind, but a shot to the bullocks that dropped you like a sack of rocks,” Jenny threw back at me. “And where the hell are your clothes?”

“Casualty of war, I’m afraid,” I quipped, “But I’m afraid my apparent death is not all we must deal with this evening. Do ye remember my speakin’ of Lord John?”

“The one who sent you to Hellwater after that hell hole Ardsmuir closed? Why would you be bringin’ him up just now?”

“He’ll be here before the hour’s out, he and his…son.”

For some reason it was hard to even say the word.

“And I would greatly appreciate it could you all keep your wits about you tonight,” I said in subdued tones I hoped would impart my seriousness.

“And just what are you implyin’?”

“I would just be…most grateful if you would impress upon all assembled to keep their comments to themselves in front of the boy.”
“Is there something wrong with the boy?” Jenny asked, not backing off her confrontation one bit.

“Can you just do as I ask this once?”

“Alright, brother,” she agreed, shaking her head as she went back inside.

When the sound of two horses clip-clopped into range, I emerged from the house in an array of borrowed clothing, most ill-fitting. I had quickly cleaned up, but chose to leave the day’s growth on my chin and jaw, for I still looked quite young with a fresh shave, and didna wish to put a point on any resemblance to William that was not completely obvious. Jenny came out of the house dusting herself off and wiping a light sheen off her brow as she brushed her wayward bangs out of her eyes. She shielded herself against the setting sun, looking out upon our guests.

“John, may I present my sister, Jenny Murray.”

“Enchanted,” he responded, taking her hand and touching a kiss to it.

“Lord John,” she said with a tilt of her head and slight genuflection.

“And this is…his son…William,” I very carefully pronounced.

The boy stepped out of his backlit position, and his features became clear. Jenny’s eyes shifted up sideways to catch my glare.

“Aye…A fine looking boy, to be sure.”

“Thank-you for your hospitality, Mrs. Murray. Sorry to drop in unannounced. I planned for us to visit Jamie in Edinburgh, but when we arrived we were told he’d made the trip home…”

Lord John turned a hand palm up and roughly signaled to my location.

“Fergus lured him home under the guise of celebrating the day of his birth, and nearly made it the day of his death instead.”

“Aye,” I hummed, holding down a smile so as Jenny wouldna…well, whatever I thought she might do to me.

I stood, somewhat nervously, as Jenny introduced Lord John and William to Ian and to those of their children who were here – most of them, as it was to be a birthday dinner held in my honor. Ian patted me on the shoulder and grinned proudly as he refilled my glass. Happily surprised smiles followed me around the room, all of them quite sure they were welcoming a family member even if the person in question was unaware of the distinction.

I was relieved that William seemed oblivious to the looks from others that moved between me and the boy, followed by broad smiles and stifled laughter. By the end of dinner, it was clear William was the only person in the room not questioning how Lord John came to be the father of my son. But apparently Jenny had impressed upon those assembled to do as I asked, and keep their curiosity contained. I didn’t draw an easy breath that night until William was tucked up in bed and sleeping soundly.

Lord John and I stood at the door to his bedroom, watching him sleep.

“It’s been a long day for the boy. He’ll sleep well tonight,” I told John, “But I must ask…”
“Why am I here? And why did I bring him?” Lord John said for me.

“Aye…why take the risk?”

We walked down to the kitchen, now empty, and hovered near the hearth, seeing each other only in the dim glow of firelight.

“I’ve been appointed governor of Jamaica, and knowing the dangers of going asea, I didn’t wish to make my goodbyes in a letter.”

“Is William going with you?” I said with some alarm.

“No, but, I thought he would enjoy the adventure of coming here, and I wanted some time with him before I left. I also thought, that should anything befall me, this may be the only time…I wanted you to know more of him than what our letters convey.”

“Thank-you for that – he’s…he’s grown so much,” I said with my throat choking up.

Lord John saw that I wanted to say so much more, but understood my reluctance to let my guard down.

“I also have something I want you to have that was best not sent, but brought.”

That’s when John took the miniature portrait out of his pocket and handed it to me. William’s face looked up at me, and my knees buckled, John catching me on his shoulder as we embraced over our shared son.

“Thank-you, truly, for letting me…know him. Most others would not be so generous.”

We joined Ian and Jenny, and I stiffened my spine, knowing Jenny would have something to say.

~~~~~

“So, brother, there were some things you neglected to tell me about your time in Hellwater it seems.”

“Aye, but now is not the time.”

“If not now…”

“A time will come when I shall tell you everything, I promise ye that, but we have more pressing problems at present.”

“You mean Laoghaire?” she replied with a hint of regret as to her involvement in getting me married to the lass in the first place.

“Aye.”

~~~~~

I cried myself to sleep that night with the portrait of William clasped tightly in my palm. With the hell the last day had rained down on me, I considered it a mild, but necessary, reaction.

~~~~~

Young Ian was in the yard when Laoghaire rode into sight. Halfway across the yard, Ian saw
William, and a smirk sprouted on his face as a devious idea struck him.

“Where is everyone?” Laoghaire demanded as Ian took the reins of her horse into hand.

“Most of them have gone down to the mill.”

William heard the muffled voices of their conversation and turned toward the sound, the light striking his face just right, making him the spitting image of a young Jamie.

Laoghaire looked taken aback, a deep inhale of air coming from her; that reaction cementing Ian’s previous idea into his head.

“Who is that?” Laoghaire inquired, a hint of fear creeping into her voice.

“The strangest thing,” Ian began, “the other night, Uncle Jamie’s birthday no less, when Jamie did not come back from your estate, we went out in groups to search. Fergus had told us he’d seen you kill Jamie, but we found nothing, until, that is, we found a bairn near the mill. We brought him to the house, and he’s grown to that size in the days since. At first, we couldna understand, but now it’s become clear – he is Uncle Jamie, reborn and looking the very spit of him. At this rate, he’ll be full grown by week’s end…So…Fergus was right? You killed Jamie?...But I guess he can’t be made to stay that way.”

Ian looked serious. Laoghaire turned pale.

“I was right…all along. I knew it…that woman was a witch! Claire did this to him – well, you can keep that spirit child far from my door! I’ll not be caught up by what that witch did to my Jamie. He would have loved me had she not cursed his soul.”

Laoghaire whipped the reins out of Ian’s hands and turned the horse quickly, spurring it on as fast as she could take it home.

William came across the yard.

“What did she want?” William asked, coming up beside young Ian.

“Och, nothing important. She used to be married to my uncle Jamie.”

“Is she the one who left him naked by the mill?”

“Aye, but she won’t trouble us anymore.”

“Who was that thunderin’ off?” young Ian heard his mother ask behind him.

“It was Laoghaire,” he answered.

“What did she want now?”

“She never got around to sayin’…Where’s Uncle Jamie?”

“He’s in the study wi’ your Da and John Grey…why?”

“I think I best tell him something.”

“Ian – what’ve ye done now?”

He smiled impishly and ducked past Jenny before she could grab for his ear. He turned to look at
his mother, shrugged his shoulders, and dashed into the house.

“Are you in on whatever Ian is up to?” Jenny aimed at William.

“No Ma’am,” he replied politely.

Jenny couldn’t hold her smile.

“If I didna know children so well, I’d almost believe ye. I’ve never met a lad who was as sweet and innocent as he appeared. You best come inside. It wouldn’a do for you to be out here should Laoghaire return. No tellin’ what that woman might do next.”

~~~~~

Young Ian knocked on the closed study door. The three men inside all came to attention. Jamie pulled the door open and nodded at Ian as he let him pass.

“Laoghaire was just here...and...”

Jamie put a hand on the boy’s shoulder and nodded encouragingly.

“Well...by the way she rode outta here...I may have made her believe...”

“Ian?” Jamie sternly asked.

“She left here thinking William was a reincarnation of you, Uncle Jamie.”

“Oh, Ian, you didna...I should tan your hide...” his father remarked.

Jamie turned to look at Lord John where he stood by the side of the fireplace. He looked mildly bemused. Jamie’s left cheek came up with his one sided smile.

“William didna hear this, did he?” Jamie asked.

“No Uncle.”

“Well then,” Jamie chortled, “I think I may have the answer to our problem with Laoghaire. Or at least a place to start.”

~~~~~

The two Ians, Lord John and I put our heads together. We extracted the encounter details from the boy, and now that Young Ian had put an otherworldly fear into Laoghaire’s mind, it would serve us well in our efforts to take Marsali and Joan from her.

“You are a wicked one,” Jamie said to Young Ian, “But it doesna fall far from the tree,” he harangued.

~~~~~

I was in no hurry to say goodbye to William or Lord John, so I was glad to have them at Lallybroch with me for the better part of a week. It was gladdening to see so many traits in William that marked him as my blood, although the strength it took not to talk with the boy about it was painful. He was nearly as tall as Lord John already and was smart beyond his years. There were several times Jenny and I were speaking Gaelic so we could talk about the boy even if he was within hearing distance, and though I was sure he knew not a word of the tongue, he looked knowingly at
each of us, like he knew every word.

I timed my foray to claim my girls from Laoghaire to coincide with the travel plans Lord John and William had for their return home, figuring that if things went well, we could travel as one group until we had to part ways. I had Young Ian and Fergus ride with John and William on the road back to Edinburgh, collecting a wagon that held all the worldly possessions of my girls that they had been smuggling out of the house in dribs and drabs. They left in the morning at the same time I made the ride to Laoghaire’s estate. Fergus had gotten a note to Marsali and Joan informing them that I had not died, and that I would be coming for them, but to not tell their mother. He later met with them on one of their trips to the wagon to deposit a portion of their belongings, and told them the broad strokes of my plan, so they would be prepared to take action at the right moment.

I left my horse a safe distance and walked slowly and calmly toward the front door of Laoghaire’s house. With nothing but old borrowed clothes, I looked faded in the bright sun, somewhat ghost-like and ethereal. Laoghaire met me at the door and stood wide to fill the frame and block my way.

“You’ll not pass my threshold, Jamie Fraser, or whatever you really are now.”

I didna speak, but I opened my palms to her and spread my arms wide.

“You are not welcome here…I should have known she’d not leave you alone, that she’d use her witchcraft on you to keep you from being free to love me. If only they’d burned her…but you saved her from that fate. After all I did to get her on that pyre. She bewitched you and then she left you…unleashed her evil and then disappeared into thin air. The real James Fraser died before I ever got him, and died again by my hand not two weeks past.”

“I’ve come for the girls,” I stated plainly, taking another step toward her.

Despite her bold words of a few moments before, Laoghaire held fear in her eyes. I advanced, one slow step at a time, my hands held out to her. I stopped just inches in front of her, and once again said, “I’ve come for the girls.”

I demonstrably closed my fingers over one palm at a time, like I was taking hold and collecting something in each hand. I nodded to Laoghaire, like I was thanking her, and I turned on my heel. I curved my arms like I held one daughter on each side and was walking them away with me. I heard Laoghaire shriek the girls’ names, but I did not break stride. I only hoped they had played their part, and escaped through the kitchen door while their mother was distracted.

~~~~~

The ride to Edinburgh was uneventful for the most part. Joan and William struck up a quick friendship despite their age difference, and they exchanged letters for many years. I know this because I took custody of her belongings at the end of her long life, and was able read the letters William sent to her. He confided a great many things to her, including his heartbreak when Lord John died, and his learning of the truth of his parentage.

Despite her young age when we arrived in France, Joan began her religious education under the tutelage of Mother Hildegard, who was more than happy that I thought of her when Joan expressed her wishes to live a life devoted to God, but was sad to see Claire was not with me, and that her whereabouts were unknown. I assured Mother Hildegard my search for Claire would be unending, and that I fully intended to find her and, if she would have me, have her for as long as we might. I told her we might have a child, if things had gone right, and she said she would pray for our issue, and for the possibility of a reunion between Claire and me.
I never set eyes on Laoghaire again, thankfully. But I spent some good years with Marsali and Fergus after they wed in France. Young Ian was reunited with his brother Michael who had been in Jared’s employ for some time. Jared had room enough for us all, and jobs to suit us all. We had the printing press shipped first to France, as it was no longer safe to stay in Edinburgh, but the climate there was changing as well – it wasna safe to be on either side -rich or poor. A chance meeting between Fergus and a man who claimed to know Benjamin Franklin put the thought in his head to go to the colonies and take up the printing trade full time – a notion, heading to the colonies that is, that stuck in young Ian’s head. I knew Jenny would kill me were I to let her youngest go off on such a journey alone, so when his mind was made up, and being part Fraser and part Murray there would be no talking him out of it, I made arrangements for Fergus, Marsali, Ian and me, and the printing press, to sail to America.

~~~~~
I followed Jamie to the raised hearth and leaned against its warm edge. I found him pressing his
thumb on top of each of the bannocks that were lined up along the stones closest to a nice bank of
glowing embers that had kept the kettle with our stew warm all night.

“Och, they’re done,” he beamed down at me.

As I watched, Jamie broke off a corner from one of the bannocks, spread something over the
broken, porous side, and popped it into my mouth. My eyes widened as a marvelous flavor hit
multiple taste buds.

“Scottish lemon curd,” he said with a proud smile.

“It’s wonderful,” I replied as soon as I was able to swallow.

He was nibbling on his own slathered bannock corner and nodded in reply to my reply.

Jamie continued to ply me with curd covered niblets until I let out a sigh, and blocked his next
offering from my mouth.

“I really couldn’t eat another bite.”

He ate the piece in his hand, and licked his fingers clean.

Jamie pulled me to my feet and wrapped his arms around me, just breathing deeply and sighing.
My entire body began to buzz along with my head. I wondered if that sip of powerful whisky
earlier was just now taking effect.

~~~~~

He kissed me strongly as we reached the foot of the bed, and he softened his grip on me enough
that I slithered the few inches to the floor, brushing down his body as I went.

“My once and future wife,” he rumbled seductively.

His hand went to the tie of my dress, an eyebrow raised questioningly. I nodded down once,
smiling and blushing as I glanced sideways and caught his eyes.

“Now, there’s nothing dangerous under there, is there?” he vocalized with a smirk.

“Well…I guess that depends…how dangerous do you consider my naked body?”

“Verra dangerous – perhaps the most dangerous thing you own, Sassenach,” Jamie breathed, lop-
sided smile sliding up the left side of his face as he tilted that side upward.

He untied my dress and separated the sides, pulling me to him with the fabric. Jamie’s right hand
slid up the back of my neck, his fingers embedding in my hair like a comb too fine to do the job,
enmeshing and molding to the shape of my scalp. He gently angled my head back, making sure I
looked him square in the eyes.

“I may have lain with other women, but you are the only one burned into my soul,” he said, taking
more of my breath with each of his words.

His hands traveled down my body as we kissed, getting me completely undressed in the process. My hands kept him close, not allowing him to pull too far away or stop kissing me. I wanted him naked, too, and began fumbling first with the buttons on his shirt, and drawing his shirt-tails loose. My jaw nearly started to chatter as I spied the line of his kilt slipping a bit without the shirt to keep it stabilized, revealing the perfect lines of his muscles.

“Naked…now,” I commanded between kisses, stroking my hands down his chest.

I slipped my hands into the folds of his kilt, hoping to remove it from his body, but was left with my fingers tangled in tartan as he released the belt holding the kilt. It billowed out and over us as we landed on the bed.

His hands traced out my arms as his mouth worked its way down my neck and shoulders. Jamie pushed back on his arms, looking me over like he hadn’t seen me for a long time. The reality of being betrothed seeming to bring a new level of passion to his wants. He plunged his fingers under my back and his mouth continued the interrupted path it had been traveling, soon finding himself poised over my breasts.

“You are delicious,” he hissed, then returned to suckling and kissing, slowly taking control of my body.

Jamie proceeded to burn any and all memories of other lovers from both our minds, using whatever anger I still might have harbored toward Laoghaire and turning it into a passion to bind us, body and soul, our commitment solidified for eternity.

~~~~~

My eyes opened suddenly. I’m not sure why. Jamie’s smile was so sweet, but when his eyes opened I felt held in a leonine gaze I could not turn away from. The breath was catching in my chest. He took my hand and began kissing his way from knuckle to knuckle.

“Again?” I questioned, knowing very well what he wanted. “I’m not sure I can even move after earlier…remember, I am twice your age now.”

“Well, Sassenach, that may be, but that just makes me want you doubly as much…Besides, I doubt I would break ye, you’re quite flexible yet from what I can tell.”

“I’ve done yoga for many years.”

Jamie stopped kissing my hand and looked straight into my eyes. He pressed his palms together and as his eyebrows arched he deeply purred, “Namaste.”

My mouth dropped open in disbelief.

As if trying to test the limits of my flexibility, Jamie brought one of my legs up to my chest and began kissing the back of my knee, slowly moving up my thigh. My toes were clutching his shoulder as my hands were searching for a handhold. I finally got my hands on the bolster pillow that ran the width of the bed and dropped my elbows behind it. I think Jamie thought I was trying to escape from him, but his hands adeptly maneuvered me back into his controlling grasp as he pulled the bolster farther under me and drove my hips up against him. I teetered atop the bolster, happily rolling to and fro as Jamie tested not only my flexibility, but my stamina as well.

“Oh, God, Jamie,” I whispered, our bodies still well entwined.
“You still rouse me to heights I can barely fathom.”

I was sure he would want to prove that to me again before the night was through, but for now, he drifted to sleep, as all hallow’s eve became all saint’s day, and the veil of timelessness shrouded us.

~~~~~

I awoke alone in the bed, but sensing Jamie was not far off. He sat staring into the flames where he had brought the fire up again, and he was poking at it mindlessly with the wrought iron poker. A glass of the strong whisky kept him company. He took a sip and saw that I had awakened. He smiled, but it seemed somehow sad. I grabbed his plaid and ambled across the room to him, draping myself over him and enveloping him in the cloth.

“I thought I had worn you out as well this last time…what’s on your mind?” I asked.

He puffed a little laugh and smiled for real this time. He drew me into his lap and held me securely against his chest.

“I thought I was the one who could read you…but ye always find ways to surprise me…I was just thinkin’…if we hadn’ lost the twenty years…och…well…we’ve done a pretty good job of makin’ up for lost time.”

“And I’ve enjoyed every minute,” I hummed, plying his lips with several kisses.

“God, you doona know how many times I thanked the lord for sendin’ me a woman who liked havin’ sex as much as I do – and one who could teach me properly at that. I never forgot the feel of the first time ye touched me. I could conjure the memory of our wedding night, and relive that, and a good many more encounters. It never left me, and it sustained me through many a night.”

I could no longer resist taking his face in my hands and kissing him strongly. Even after exhausting our passions several times over, the well had not run dry, and we both knew it. Jamie slowly stood, keeping us wrapped in the plaid. The only thing toasting on the hearth stones now were my own buns as Jamie leaned me across the mouth of the fireplace.

“Oh, Jamie,” were the last coherent words I spoke as we engaged yet again. All the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck were standing straight out, and every nerve ending in my body seemed to be on full alert.

“Oh, my Lord in Heaven,” I heard Jamie beseech as I traced my fingernails down the back of his head and neck. When my hands stopped, Jamie looked in my eyes and flashed an amazed smile.

I smiled back, then closed my eyes and let Jamie answer his own prayer.

~~~~~

“Ohh-ho,” I moaned deeply.

Every muscle in my body ached. The night before had been a real workout, but I can honestly say I’ve never enjoyed a workout so much. The bed Jamie and Brianna had made for this room was incredible, and oh so comfortable. Jamie and I were quite warm despite the fact that the fire had burned down to nothing.

“Good morning,” Jamie vibrated against my neck, the tickling sensation traveling the length of my spine. I moaned again.
“I’m not sure about that. I may not walk for a week.”

Jamie laughed in my ear.

“I’ll help you work the kinks out.”

“Hair of the dog may work with hangovers, but I doubt it will take the cramp out of my muscles.”

Jamie turned me to face him, my limbs arguing the whole way. The look on his face was contagious and I forced my arm to move so I could caress his face.

“Last night was...”

Jamie kissed me before I could choose my next words.

“Magical?” he asked.

“Last night I felt the way I did when I was first able to admit I love you. Everything that stood in the way of my heart being completely open to you faded away.”

Jamie seized my wrist and slid his hand up into my palm, our fingers locking our hands tight together.

“Blood of my blood, bone of my bone, our bodies are one, ‘til our lives be done,” Jamie paraphrased from the vows we made a lifetime ago.

“Oh, God, I can’t move,” I groaned, trying to stretch out.

“Good,” popped off his tongue.

Jamie began kissing me, his hands wandering as the extent of my incapacitation became evident.

“Jamie, I can’t even feel my own ass.”

“Don’t you fret, Sassenach, I’ll feel it for ye.”

“Jamie!” I admonished, “I’d love to accommodate you…but…I really need a pee...”

Jamie laughed at me, but began pulling back the covers and the curtains around the bed. He hoisted me into his arms and set to carry me to the loo.

“Then I’ll draw you a bath, Sassenach, to ease those aching muscles of yours, followed by a nice breakfast back in our bed to restore your strength.”

“That sounds lovely,” I told him, enjoying the conveyance.

~~~~~

It was five days into November before I heard from Bree. She’d seen the progression of my renewed relationship with Jamie and was wise enough to know the effect the Leoch room was likely to have on Jamie and me. By the time Bree called, I had a lot to share with her.

“Did you figure it was finally safe to call?” I teased my now less easily embarrassed daughter, but I could still hear her blushing.

After a slight pause I heard her hum of laughter.
“I figured if you hadn’t surfaced by now, I should probably call 911 so the paramedics could separate you and provide fluids.”

Her flippant tone delighted me.

“We’re both fine, in fact, we’re engaged.”

“So you said yes, then?”

“You knew he was going to ask me?”

“He asked for my blessing – I’m so glad you said yes.”

“Not only that, I’ve booked the church – I hope you’ll be able to make arrangements for your classes.”

“Why would I need to make arrangements?”

“Um…the church I booked – it’s where your father and I got married the first time – It’s in Scotland, and it’s six weeks from now.”

There was a long silence, and I worried I had just dropped too much on Brianna in a phone call.

“Are you still there?” I asked.

“Yeah, um…wow. You don’t waste time, do you…um…I’ll talk to my advisor. I’m ahead in most of my classes, but I’ll have to see if I can get my exams rescheduled…so…the room…”

“Oh, sweetie, the room took my breath away – and it took me back in time, too.”

“Good. I hoped it would. The vision for the room Jamie has was so clear. I feel like I was actually in the castle – walking into the past like that – it was like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

“Jamie tells me…he couldn’t have done it without you.”

“He’s lying – he could have easily done the whole thing without me, but I’m so glad he let me help him. He’s…he’s becoming…a real dad. I didn’t know I wanted one until I saw how much he cares.”

A feeling of warmth traveled outward from my heart. I had dreamed so many times of my family being together, of Jamie and Bree having a father-daughter relationship – a genuine kinship. It was hard to believe I was not dreaming.

“I’m glad too…Bree?”

“Yeah?”

“Come for dinner? We can go over the itinerary for the wedding.”

“You already have an itinerary set?”

“Actually, that would be Fiona’s doing – I emailed her with the good news after I booked the church – she and Roger say ‘hi’. I thought if anyone could help me organize a wedding so quickly, it would be Fee.”

“It will be good to see them again,” Brianna emanated, “See you tonight.”
I ended the call and went back to my online search for a good package deal for flights and hotel accommodations for the three of us. There was so much to do in the next month so that I could become Jamie’s wife again.

Bree gave me a big hug as soon as she came through the door, and while we were embracing, Jamie came and put his arms around me, managing to come as close as he ever had to holding his daughter, just with me in between.

We sat around the table in the kitchen discussing what I’d found online and the suggestions Fiona had sent me – hotel names, places we could hire for the reception, if we chose to go that route, dressmakers, kilt fitters, florists, and what members of her family were available to be in the wedding, if needed.

I had been sending Fiona regular updates since Jamie came back into my life, telling her the amazing news that Jamie was alive, that he finally got to meet his daughter, and that we still had the same spark we did in 1743. Even after all these years, Fiona and Roger were the only other two people on this planet who could understand all I’d been through, and never once think me crazy.

Brianna took the papers from my hands of Fiona’s emails, and looked through them, coming upon a page of several printed out photos Fee had included with her last message.

“What’s this?” she questioned, looking to me for clarification.

“Fee found some pictures from when we last visited.”

Brianna seemed to be seriously examining the images, piquing Jamie’s interest.

“These were taken at the Black Kirk,” Bree said aloud, showing them to Jamie.

“Aye,” Jamie happily recognized, “I took your Mam there for the first time. She was tryin’ to solve a wee medical mystery.”

“Sounds like Dr. Mom – she never could turn down a good mystery.”

“To be sure,” Jamie said with a smirk, clearly remembering my single-minded determination that got me into trouble more than once. Brianna and Jamie caught each other’s eyes and smiled, and Jamie nudged Bree with his shoulder. I watched as both of them bit their bottom lips, and coyly blinked their lashes.

I took the paper back into my hands and sighed.

“I felt like I could breathe free for the first time when we were there – just the two of, with no prying eyes or ears,” I uttered almost unconsciously.

“That’s why you wanted to go there, wasn’t it?” Bree asked. “It was sorta your…first date?”

The burning on my cheeks caught me off guard.

“It was just…really nice to be able to put down my guard…and I got to know a bit about Jamie’s frame of mind, his sense of humor. And it cemented my trust in him,” I divulged as tears came into my eyes.

“Sorry, sometimes the memories come back so strong.”
Jamie put his hand on my back and Bree took my hand in hers. Jamie took up the print-out and held it.

“How old were you?” he asked Bree.

“Fourteen,” she answered, almost embarrassed.

“And already taller than your mam,” he said, puffing up with pride.

“Yes, our daughter dwarfed me quite early on – at least when I was able to make her stand up straight.”

Jamie cast a questioning glance at his daughter.

“It’s not always easy being the tallest person in the room, at least for me it wasn’t.”

“Aye, standing tall takes more than height, but you have all it takes, now.”

Bree sat up taller, Jamie’s pride in her giving her ego a boost. I’d seen Brianna grow so much as a person since Jamie was here to be her father. She has always been a wonderfully complete person with me, but now, with Jamie’s influence, my daughter…our daughter, looked happier than I had ever seen before. I had to fight back tears, biting my lip to control the urge. Jamie was right – she was slowly gaining the confidence that allowed her to stand tall in the face of whatever was to come.

I took my seat across the table from the pair of them, and we went over Fiona’s lists, Brianna taking down the web sites, and ruling several places out on the spot, but ruling in the possibility of several of the hotels and banquet halls based on their looks and proximity to the church.

By the time we bid Bree adieu for the night, things were well in hand, and we’d split the duties – Bree would take care of the hotel arrangements, I would take care of flight reservations, and Fiona would handle the catering and flowers, and witnesses (as well as finding me the seamstress for a very special dress to be wed in). And, no, we did not exclude Jamie from having something to do – there were a number of items he needed to collect and have shipped – for the TSA, I daresay, would have something to say about a broadsword and dagger in Jamie’s carry-on!
Nosferatu's Got Nothing On You, Jamie

Claire slammed a pile of papers on the desk, and I knew she was cranked up about something.

“Is there a reason you’ve killed a whole tree, Claire? You could jack up a car with that pile.”

“That pile, as you’re calling it, that’s the paperwork we’ll have to take care of if you want to legally marry me this time. And I’ve got fewer than ten days to get this filled out and sent to the right people. Right now what I wouldn’t give for Dougal to twist some arms…gahhh.”

She viciously traced her hands through her hair and widened her eyes. I was glad there was nothing breakable within her reach just now.

“Aye, marriage is no simple deal,” I agreed, taking one of her hands captive. She tried to pull free for a moment, wanting to remain angry and frustrated, but I stood and collected Claire into my arms as she sighed and leaned her full weight against me as she took a deep breath instead.

“I had no idea there would be so much red tape until Jem directed me to the National Records of Scotland website – please tell me you have a birth certificate and passport that can be used in an official capacity?”

“Aye,” I exhaled, glad I would not add to her worries. “Griff’s father, Andrew, introduced me to some…detail oriented document experts, and convinced them to make me another set of papers after my plane crash…Hogmanay…1981…I started a new year, but my band mates did not.”

I sighed heavily as a moment of memory caught up with me.

Claire was quiet, but in her eyes I could see she was mourning my band mates. Her compassion knows no bounds.

After our moment of quiet reflection, I had a thought.

“Are your papers in order? And are ye younger or older than I am, Sassenach, I mean on paper?”

“I’m set…Roger” she said with a tilt of her head “…he has a very talented hand for making birth certificates, and I’m the same age I’ve always been,” she teased with a smile. “I had him make me born in 1965, that way I could just count back thirty years from when Bree was born.”

I smiled again.

“Funny, you were three years older than me when we wed the first time, this time I’ll be three years older than you – My birth certificate has me born in 1962.”

“Well, you are older than I am this time!” Claire teased, “Not that you look it,” she said, looking away.

“Och, well, you doona look – “

“If you say I haven’t changed one bit I’ll bite you.”
“Ye changed, but only for the better,” I said with a smirk, hoping to evoke some level of satisfaction from my beautiful lass.

“People are still going to think I’ve robbed the cradle – remember how Bree reacted the first time she saw you?”

“Aye, I recall…but I think being happy has taken years off ye.”

“Flatterer,” she said with a tilt of her head and a smile, “but if we don’t get at it, I’ll be too old to care before we can sort out all the paperwork…What do you mean Griff’s father helped you get another set of papers?”

“He’d gotten me the set before as well, after I was killed in World War two.”

Claire looked concerned about yet another death on my escutcheon, but she just clutched me tighter.

“The paperwork here is only the beginning,” she calmly informed me, tucking her head under my chin. “I think they make it hard on purpose, to weed out the couples that aren’t serious. Thankfully, Jem knows the priest at the church, and is working on our behalf to smooth out the wrinkles, but we need to decide who our witnesses are, and get the fee money – in pounds sterling.”

“Don’t you worry, Sassenach, we’ll get everything done. Nothing is keeping me from taking you as my wife again – though I’d live in sin with ye should we have no other choice.”

I could feel the smile forming on her face, and she beamed a look at me as her cheeks went pink.

“I love you,” she hummed.

“Good to know, leannain…even better to hear you say it.”

~~~~~

“Artemis,” Jamie beamed as he entered the woodshop.

“Why, Mr. Fraser, back so soon. And what will you be buildin’ for the missus this time?”

They shook hands, and Jamie turned slightly pink in the face. He dipped his head and leaned in close to Mr. Gordon.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a used crate, or some such conveyance that could handle transatlantic shipping.”

“In need of a quick escape? Did I not warn ye about the perils of giving a woman a bed as a gift!” the man joked.

“Quite the opposite…I’m shipping some items for our wedding.”

“Och, seems you knew your woman’s mind after all…And how is Brianna? I miss seeing the pair of you.”

“She’s good, and getting better all the time – but she’s quite busy.”
“I don’t imagine – the demands of college, but she’s smart as a whip.”

Jamie tried not to puff up too proudly.

“Aye,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“A crate, you say…now let me think…I just might have what you’ll need, but it’ll not be acutely what you were looking for. Follow me.”

~~~~~

I thought Jamie and I had been into every room Griff had said we could use in the house, but there was one more room, and Jamie took me in there for the first time today.

“It’s the treasure room – it’s where I have the cask with the whisky that nearly felled you our first night in the Leoch room. I’ve got several lifetimes of treasures in here. Griff brought much of it when he moved here to Boston. Before that, it took up most of the attic at Griff’s father’s house in Wales.”

“Did you know Griff’s father well?” I asked, following Jamie through the door.

“Aye, still do.”

“He’s alive?” I asked, suddenly feeling uplifted.

“He’s getting on, of course, in his nineties now…but he was…verra important to me. He was the first man in nearly one hundred years who I trusted enough to tell him everything – not that he left with much a choice, but that’s a story for another time.”

“So, Griff inherited the position of confessor, did he?”

“Funny you should put it that way, Sassenach. Between Jenny and Andrew, it was only men of the cloth who learned the truth of my life.”

I smiled, remembering how amazed I had been by Father Anselm’s reaction to my confession of time travel and bigamy. I gripped Jamie’s shoulder.

“Some members of the clergy can be surprisingly open-minded.”

“Aye,” he replied with a nod, “So, as I said, Mr. Gordon had a quite suitable crate for shipping my wears to the wedding.”

Jamie turned me around and my mouth dropped open as I looked at what Mr. Gordon had provided to him. At first, I was somewhat repelled by the crate Jamie acquired to ship his wedding attire, and assorted sundries to Scotland.

“Jamie, it’s a coffin.”

“Aye.”

“But…”
“A person whose got the bullocks to pinch items from a coffin, deserves to have them,” Jamie told me, turning me back around and leaning in to kiss me on the forehead. He held me at arm’s length, his hands solidly wrapped around my waist.

“And it’s never been used,” he tried to reassure me.

“Jamie…what am I supposed to tell Roger? He has to pick the damn thing up!”

Jamie cocked his head and pulled one of his hands back to perch it on his hip.

“He’s a Scot, he’ll understand.”

“What?”

“It was free,” Jamie said with an immense smile, and then walked out of the room.

~~~~~

I found what of mine had been brought here from the storage unit and made my way down through the layers of Bree’s photos to the other box I kept in that storage tub. The beautifully carved and engraved ring Jamie had given me on our first wedding day still made my heart leap when I looked at it. I was just beginning to have true and deep feelings for Jamie when he put it on my finger, and it stayed there until the day I left Scotland for Boston. The risk of losing it was just too great during my years of medical school and residency, so I’d decided new country, new life. I’d boxed up my old life, and left all but a small collection of items – this very box in my hands – behind.

I didn’t even save one item of Brianna’s baby clothes.

I guess I had been caught up in my memories far longer than I realized, for Jamie came back looking for me. I was holding the ring between my thumb and forefinger, totally lost in thought.

“Och…you still have it,” he uttered in a reverent tone.

“Of course, I’d never let it go, I just feared losing it, so it got safely put away.”

Jamie put his hand behind mine and cradled it.

“Do you want to use it? For this wedding?” He asked.

I nodded until he put his other arm around my waist and pulled me in under his chin.

“As you wish,” his voice vibrated. “I’m glad…that you held onto it. I didna wish to ask, in case you’d lost it, or…”

“I would never part with this ring voluntarily, Jamie.”

“Is the ring Frank gave ye…among ye’re keepsakes, too?”

“No. After he died, I didn’t want to look at it – I actually gave it to Roger, and told him to do with it what he would.”

I shook my head and laughed at the thought.
“Roger kept it until I made my intention to move to Boston and attend medical school public knowledge. The gold in that ring paid for Brianna’s and my plane tickets, with a nice sum left over. Frank’s ring launched me into my future – I guess it was fitting that if Frank could not take care of me, his ring could give me the means to be set free.”

“Aye, it wasna what I’d had in mind when I sent you back to him, but it’ll do…”

Jamie continued to hold me, and time seemed to stop. There were times when I just reveled in being in the same place as Jamie, and though he hadn’t voiced it, I was pretty sure he was feeling the same way.

~~~~~

So many memories had been flooding my mind. And right now, between work and planning the wedding, and thinking of times gone by, I was flat out. When we went to bed, Jamie wrapped me in his arms and spoke to me in Gaelic. He has always had the ability to make that language sound like the very voice of nature, and I was beginning to understand much of what he said, or at least he was able to leave me with that impression.

Again, he lulled me to sleep, but by the middle of the night, I found myself awake, unable to put my mind at ease. Something nagged the corners of consciousness despite the fact that I was in the arms of the man I love, and all seemed right with my world. I did manage to sleep again, but the alarm felt startlingly early.

~~~~~

At times I worry that Claire and I are not allowing Brianna the full college experience, being so involved in her day to day life, but I’d never turn away a chance to see her. I have so many years to make up for, and so much yet to learn about my daughter. Even though we have no projects to work on, the lass is trying to be here at least one afternoon each week. I think we have seen a full three quarters of Griff’s collection of movies and shows by now.

Today was my first chance to show her the ‘crate’ and she laughed to the point of tears imagining Claire’s reaction.

I showed her the ring, still quite proud I had chosen one that had endured so well.

“Oh, I remember that – Mom wore it all the time when I was really little.”

“Aye, she told me. We’ll be using it again – we had pretty good luck with it the first time.”

I put it safely back in the crate. Claire had a few other items she wanted to add to the crate before we shipped it, but she was being a bit cryptic, if not downright secretive about it.

“Do you have anything we should add to have shipped?” I asked Brianna.

“I don’t even know what I’m going to wear. I don’t own a dress. I don’t want to embarrass you
guys, but I’ve never been to a wedding – I don’t know what you’re expecting of me.”

She looked worried.

“Don’t fash, lass – what you wore for your birthday dinner was quite becoming. Would that not work?”

“Is that…fancy enough? I mean, it is a wedding – I want to look right.”

I smirked uneasily, realizing I was bit out of my depth.

“Perhaps your mam, or Fiona, would be better equipped to help you. It’s been a long time since I had to concern myself with fashion. The simpler days, when I would throw on a shirt and a kilt and be done with it – “

“Do women wear kilts?” Bree suddenly asked.

“No, not as such,” I sadly had to inform her. “I regret it reverts to being called a skirt, even if it very much resembles the kilt.”

“Oh,” she bemoaned, a look of frustration creeping up her features.

“Well, no matter what you end up wearing for clothing, perhaps you could add this,” I said, presenting her with a small silver brooch. It was simple silver, engraved with the Fraser crest.

“While not exactly what it was designed for, I thought you might be able to use it to hold your hair, or something.”

Bree bit her bottom lip, and nodded, closing her hand around it and pulling it into her chest.

We were meant to spend the rest of the afternoon in the media room, but Brianna wandered into the library on the way down. We ended up playing pool – and I discovered my daughter is a shark – perhaps the same skill of spatial relationships that makes her good at designing buildings makes her an expert at playing the angles!

~~~~~

When I arrived home, I found Bree worried a bit about what she would wear to the wedding. Jamie had done a commendable job in keeping her from working herself into a state. She’s never been one to let fashion dictate to her, or bother her much, but I could see how much she wanted to please us. I would have loaned her anything she wanted, but nothing in my wardrobe would fit her, and frankly, my wardrobe held precious little in the fancy dress department.

We only had days to act if Bree wanted to ship her wedding wardrobe, so we started the best place we could think of – Fiona. I dashed off an email, knowing it was way too late to expect a reply because of the time difference, but remembering that Fiona has always been the proverbial early bird, and that we could likely hear from her shortly after midnight our time.

We decided to stay up, so Jamie got to work on a batch of bannocks, and Bree eagerly helped him. Seeing them together always puts such a smile on my face.
The computer made that odd noise, and I knew we had an incoming Skype call. Bree and I crowded around the screen expecting to see Fiona’s features come into focus.

“I hope everyone is decent,” Jem’s voice burred. “Claire,” he said with great delight, “things are well in hand on our end – I just thought you’d like to know that before I hand the computer over to my mother.”

“Jem, yes, that’s quite reassuring,” I told him, actually rather pleased to see his face again.

“Alright, then.”

I watched as he stood and Fiona slid into the chair in front of the computer.

“Claire, the dress is well underway. We’ll just need to do a fitting once you’re here.”

“Good…but that’s not why I’m contacting you. We…have a small problem – Brianna hasn’t got anything dressy, and we were hoping you’d have some ideas.”

“You never did take to dressing up, sweetie,” Fiona teased Bree.

“That’s putting it politely,” Bree barbed right back.

“Aye,” Fee burbled with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Let me think on it, dears. I’ll scour the closets and see what I have to work with, then I’ll sketch up something. Send me your measurements.”

“We’ll have to take them first,” Bree quipped, “Do you need them in centimetres?”

“Och, you,” Fee threw back as she lifted her chin and threw her eyes skyward.

“Thank-you,” Bree sing-songed into the screen.

“You two get to bed now,” Fiona ordered, and ended the call.

Bree greeted me brightly. While she gave me a hug, I could see her looking longingly at Jamie. As close as they’ve become, she just couldn’t yet overcome her apprehension over the thought of being in someone else’s arms. It was so strong I could feel her hollowness. It seems the closer she gets to breaking down the barriers between them, the stronger her fear becomes. I know it’s a big step for her, but I can’t help wishing the day will come soon that I will find them in each other’s embrace…for both their sakes.

When our hug ended, I was glad to see Bree grasp Jamie’s hand tightly. For the briefest moment I thought…but no, today would not be that day. And then they were off, to deliver the ‘crate’ to the air freight yard. It was only their second chance to be alone together since they finished the Leoch room.
As we rode together in the Wagoneer, I found myself looking at Jamie, unable to stop thinking, ‘I have a dad.’ I shouldn’t still be in awe of that fact, but I am. Everything I’ve thought about who I am has changed. Instead of wondering why my mom and I are so different, I can look at my dad and see how much we are alike. I used to think I was really strange. As it turns out, I’m just really Scottish. I wonder what it will be like when we go back to Scotland – will I feel like I fit in better now that I know my father?

“Are ye listening?” I heard through a fog.

“Hmm?”

“You haven’t heard a word, have ye?” Jamie said with a broad grin.

“Sorry.”

“I was saying I’d like to show you Lallybroch when we get back to Scotland. I’ve actually been working on a rough sketch – I was wondering if…maybe…you’d like to…fix the place up – Take it on as your first big project. There’s a lot of work to be done. No one’s lived there for some time now, but I would love to see it brought back to its glory. Lallybroch is your ancestral home.”

I was dumbstruck. I tried to speak repeatedly, but nothing came out. We drove in silence until we reached the air freight yard where we would surrender dad’s ‘crate’ for its journey. He parked across the street from the hangar in a single depth graveled patch blocked off by a log on cement stanchions. He stationed the coffin at left shoulder arms, and turned, looking both ways before setting off across the street.

I let out the remnants of a stifled laugh, and followed him, as a memory of something tried to surface – something from a movie. If only I could remember.

The looks on the faces of those we passed were priceless. I guess not too many coffins came in here, at least ones hoisted over someone’s shoulder.

“I just hope it arrives in time for the ceremony,” Jamie imparted as he placed it on the counter.

The man we actually dealt with didn’t react, he just said, “There’s no bereavement discount.”

“That’s OK, we’re sending it postage due,” Jamie joked. The look of shock on my face made Jamie smirk.

“No, really, this isna a body, just a convenient…box.”

~~~~~

My mind wouldn’t stop working on that movie – you how when there’s something just beyond the edge of your memory, and you can’t let it go until you reel it in – that’s what my mind was doing for a good portion of the ride home.

“Have I…put a burden on you? My suggestion about Lallybroch?”

“No. I’m trying to remember something. I had the strangest flash of a memory when you had the
coffin on your shoulder – something from a movie, but I can’t quite place it – it is driving me crazy!”

“I’ve been there,” he agreed with a nod.

When we got back to Griff’s house, I began pouring over the DVD titles, hoping something would jog my memory. Mom helped me look, until her constant calling out of titles was making me more frustrated as it was getting in the way of me making any progress. Once I was left alone with my thoughts long enough, I was able to narrow down where I might have seen someone carrying a coffin. I touched the spine of the DVD I was looking for just as Jamie said, “A-ha,” from the Leoch room next door.

He strode into the room, furled paper in his hands.

“I finished,” he said.

“I found it!” I countered with.

We smiled at each other, each of us giddy with excitement.

“You first,” I told him.

“Come, look at this. This is the Lallybroch I remember,” he proclaimed, lifting the paper horn in his hand. I brought the DVD with me and we headed into the viewing pit. Jamie proceeded to lead me through his intricate drawing of the first place he called home. I could almost see it through his eyes. I was soon looking forward to seeing it in person.

When he sat back and exhaled, I figured he had expended his head of steam, and I made the move to put the DVD in the player.

“I finally remembered what movie it was. It had been so long since I’d seen it that I can’t believe I even remembered anything about it. It’s one of the earliest vampire movies. It’s called Nosferatu, and there’s this scene where the vampire is carrying his coffin, and he stops to look both ways before he crosses the street with it! It was so ridiculous. I don’t know how far into the film it is – but I think it’s pretty early on – do you want to see if we can find it?”

“Aye, I would,” he replied, and he took up the remote.

~~~~~

Before we knew it, Thanksgiving was upon us, but one would hardly think so as the weather continued to be mild in this New England autumn. I still hadn’t had to fully embrace my winter wardrobe, and Jamie hadn’t donned anything heavier than shirt sleeves yet. Boston still bustled; the areas surrounding the different college campuses still teemed with outdoor life – like bees visiting the last blossoms of summer, caught up in the reprieve.

Bree was one of those busy bees, working to clear her schedule so she could join us for the trip to Scotland that would see us married again. She was making time for Jamie, though in much less quantity now that their secret endeavors had come to an end. I could see both of them were starting to get excited about the thought of going to and spending time in Scotland again, and I, too, was beginning to anticipate our return.
I felt like a woman caught between times, working in a modern hospital, but coming home and settling in front of a hearth where a meal slowly cooked over the open flame, and falling into a bed that always left me unsure of what part of my life I was living.

I’d put so much behind me when Bree and I moved to the states, trying to forget everything except the kindness of Fiona and Roger, and their family that had rallied around me. Subtle things, like the difference between a mizzle, a drizzle, and actual rain, would pop randomly into my mind. I found myself recalling faces – Rupert, Angus, and quite especially Murtagh. I knew Angus’ fate, witnessing it first hand, and though I hadn’t asked Jamie directly, I was relatively sure of the others’. Jamie’s resurrection and transportation would have taken him from the field of battle without the opportunity to know for sure.

I found myself with an embarrassment of riches when it came to things to be thankful for this year. Health, happiness, love, family all found their place.

I was waiting for Bree to come so we could uphold our yearly Thanksgiving tradition of spending the Wednesday night before prepping, and most of Thanksgiving afternoon and evening serving dinner to the homeless and unfortunate who would have no meal if not for the many volunteers. I also offered some basic first aid to those in need. It had actually been Brianna’s idea to volunteer. To her, the excesses of food and companionship juxtaposed to seeing people perched on heating grates was increasingly upsetting, so we began one year as servers, and got more involved each year.

Jamie brought me a fortifying cup of coffee as I sat at the table in the modern kitchen, and found me deep in thought. I looked up and smiled as he slid into the seat next to me and put his arm around my back. He gave me a concerned glance, which I answered with a question he hadn’t been expecting.

“What happened to Ned Gowan?”

Jamie looked shocked, or at least a bit taken aback, but he soon pressed his lips together and smiled as he nodded his head.

“He lived to be a right old codger, and as sharp as ever right up to the end. He’s the one who detangled me from Laoghaire’s webs, in the end – no small matter between her mental state and the demands of her brother, but he removed me from any responsibility while allowing me to retain custody of the girls.”

“They were lucky to have you,” I placidly stated, sliding my thumb up his cheek.

Children, whether of his blood or not, were always so important to Jamie, so I knew any child he looked at as his was truly fortunate.

“What made ye think of ‘ol Ned?”

With a quick exhalation of air I smiled more broadly.

“Going back to Scotland; us getting married again…it’s stirring up the past, bringing people from the shadows of my mind back into the forefront. If not for Ned’s intimate knowledge of the law, our intimate knowledge of each other might never have happened.”

Jamie blushed.

“After all we’ve done and all we’ve seen, a simple bit of word play is what turns your cheeks pink?”
“Well, Sassenach, I had a sudden memory of the first time I saw ye naked, is all. Although, Ned or no, I’d think Dougal’d have found a way to either get us wed or…I hate to think what else he might’ve considered.”

“Too right.”

“You two will be careful? Should I escort the pair of ye?”

I leaned my head into his shoulder.

“You needn’t worry, Bree and I will be fine.”

The bell rang.

“That’ll be our lass, then,” Jamie said with growing joy in his voice.

“I told her to ring, but come in on her own,” I told Jamie as we began to hear footsteps crossing the foyer.

Jamie began to beam seeing Bree come into the kitchen. He was on his feet almost before I could stop leaning on his shoulder.

“A mhuirnin,” he breathed out, taking her hands.

“Ciamar a tha u?” Bree tentatively inquired.

Jamie’s face lit up at her attempt at Gaelic.

“I’m fine. You will call if anything seems amiss, mo nighean?”

Bree rolled her eyes and smirked in my direction.

“We’ll be fine – Anyway, Mom knows where to strike to do the most damage!”

I tried to hold in my laughter, but my jaw chattered the harder I tried.

“You two may not be the end of me physically, but you will drive me insane, I swear it…Off you go, do your good deed. I’ll have something waiting. You go feed others, and I’ll feed you when you get home.”

“Oh, that sounds so good,” I informed my soon-to-be husband.

I used to look forward to Thanksgiving for the chance to do something different, to make a difference for people who had nothing, because I knew how easily I could be one of them. Tonight, I did have more reasons to be thankful than last year, and that made it all the more important that I try to give others something to be thankful for in return.

~~~~~

Bree sent Jamie a text once we were headed home, and as a result we were greeted with the aroma of fresh baked bannocks and piping hot coffee upon arrival.
I made Brianna try the lemon curd that Jamie had surprised me with the other night.

“Oh, wow!” she gushed. “That’s amazing.”

I nodded knowingly at her discovery of the taste sensation Jamie had introduced me to only weeks ago.

We sat quietly nibbling and enjoying each other’s company until I began to yawn. Jamie stood, preparing to see me to bed. Bree was staying over so we could get a jump on our day of service tomorrow. Surprising us both, Jamie took hold of Brianna’s face with both hands. They stared long into each other’s eyes, and then Jamie kissed her on the forehead.

“I am proud of you,” he told her.

I could see her fighting back tears.

When Jamie was back by my side, I could see he was fighting back tears as well. I wiped away one of his tears so Brianna could see me do it. She flicked a smile at me, but hid her face behind her coffee mug and closed her eyes until Jamie and I had left the room. I’m not sure how long she stayed up after we’d gone to bed.

~~~~~

Claire and Brianna were off early on their mission of mercy. I made sure both ate a fortifying breakfast, but as soon as they were away, I began my mission for the day. I had spent enough years in America to understand the traditions, and I knew for most Thanksgiving was a day of great feasting. For my girls, it was different, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t want supper when they got home. Despite knowing the madness I was about to encounter, I was willing to endure it, for them.

The grocery store was an absolute mad-house. I actually thought two women were going to kill each other with a frozen Butterball until the meat manager brought out some other large, naked birds.

I made my required purchases and was back at the house within an hour. While exploring several weeks ago, I found there was a formal dining room adjoining the modern kitchen, trapped behind a pair of pocket doors that had long since stopped moving the way they were meant to. With a fair amount of effort, I had restored the doors to working order, and had found a truly delightful space behind them.

Although the elaborate dish sets displayed in the room were meant to be merely decorative, I took the chance that they would survive at least one meal. The gold and white figures and patterns reminded me of dishes Claire and I might have dined on in Paris, but I used them anyway. We’ve not had a formal meal together since finding each other, but I thought the occasion called for it. We would soon be leaving this house as single individuals only to be returning as a married couple, a family – something that had been missing from my life since I lost Jenny all those years ago.

So far I had cooked up offerings of stews and desserts and bannocks, of course, and Claire had yet to have a complaint, so it was time to up my game and make her and Brianna something to eat that required a plate rather than a bowl, and utensils…other than a spoon.
Each of us would have our own small bird – they called them Cornish hens, but as I never heard them speak, I couldn’t verify their true origin. It was a scaled down Thanksgiving dinner for each of our plates, with all the trimmings. Brianna sent word of their impending arrival. Everything was ready, and enclosed in the dining room for me to present to my girls. I looked upon the table, and couldn’t help but smile from ear to ear. Now all I had to do was wait for Claire and Brianna, my two reasons to be thankful.

~~~

Bree and I were exhausted and invigorated all at the same time. We had served meals to hundreds of people today, which made me feel quite accomplished, but each year it struck an off chord to know we were headed home, to a place with heat, and food and drink, while those we served likely had no place to call home, and no reliable source of either heat or food. Those were the thoughts that drained me, but Bree was always there to pick me up.

I’m glad Brianna never had personal experience of famine and homelessness, or war for that matter. I wish I could say she’d never encountered anything unpleasant, but knowing what she had been through, I saw in her the resilience brought of adversity – an inner strength. In the face of the worst the world had to offer, I had Jamie to bolster me, and while I was there for Brianna, sometimes I think I leaned on her as hard as I had on Jamie, leaving her to find a strength all of her own.

Bree pulled me against her hip as we walked up the path to the house, reminding me so much of her father. She smiled at me, and I felt an openness from her, a lightness of being that had been missing these last few years. She sucked in a deep breath, like she was taking the very essence of Autumn into her soul.

“Something smells wonderful,” she imparted.

“Probably one of the neighbors,” I replied.

Brianna pulled me up the steps as the fatigue of being on my feet had suddenly turned my limbs to rubber as I tried to climb the steep staircase.

“Oh,” I whispered as we entered the foyer. The amazing smell on the wind was emanating from within this house! Each breath was like taking another bite as we followed our noses to the kitchen.

Jamie was just sitting at the table in the modern kitchen, which was covered with a mountain of ‘Black Friday’ circulars. Bree and I looked at each other in confusion. There wasn’t a pot, pan or bowl on the stove or counters, although I noted that the oven was on.

“Is there some kind of air freshener that smells like Thanksgiving?” I inquired, tilting my head and apparently glaring at Jamie. He stood and gave me a disarming kiss.

Bree was a bit more direct.

“If you ate an entire Thanksgiving dinner while we were away, and all that’s left is the smell…”

“Mo chridhe, I’d not do that to ye. Come,” he said, signaling with his hand for us to follow him toward what I thought was a dead end. As we stood just behind him, Jamie cracked open what I thought to be a solid wall, and pushed the now visible doors into their wall pockets. He turned and
brightly smiled at each of us.

“Dinner is served.”

He reached for a hand from each of us and escorted us to our seats. Jamie had outdone himself, but clearly I must stop thinking anything was beyond that Scot. I shook my head incredulously.

“Where have you been hiding all this?” I finally asked.

“I picked it up today.”

“That’s braver than either of us!” Bree signified. “Shopping on Thanksgiving is nuts!”

“Aye,” he nodded, wide-eyed at the memory of what he had witnessed.

“Well, it looks delicious,” I proclaimed.

“One thing yet,” Jamie announced as he headed back to the kitchen for a moment.

“You stay – I won’t be a moment.”

Jamie returned not five minutes later with a basket of fresh rolls.

“Fresh bread? Really Jamie, how did you?...” I just shook my head.

“Well, I’d finished all the laundry, what else was I supposed to do, Sassenach?”

~~~~~

I was right. The meal was one of the best I’d ever tasted, made more so by the company. A family Thanksgiving. We sat and ate, and Bree and I told Jamie about our day and the people we’d helped during the course of it. Despite the length of the day, not one of us wanted it to end, and we’d been energized by our conversation.
Do Swans Fly?

Do Swans Fly?

Our layover turned into a stay-over when the weather led to the cancellation of our connecting flight to Scotland. The hotel room we were given, in which to bide our time, was small, but cozy. We were offered two rooms, one for me and Jamie, another for Brianna, but we chose to crowd into a single room together.

Bree showered and took to one of the room’s beds to relax, if not actually sleep. I had applied the needles to Jamie’s face to make sure he’d be ready to fly when we were able to make the next leg of our journey, and Brianna couldn’t hold her laughter at seeing him with a “pin-cushion face” as she’d named it. He was laid out on his back, taking up a narrow column of the mattress, as I sat by the pillows on the other side. I was too tired to sleep, and sat staring at nothing. I felt Bree’s eyes on me, but I did not move.

“What are you thinking about?” I heard her ask, jostling me from a drifting day-dream.

“Hmm?...Oh, I guess heading back to Scotland, and having Jamie with me, makes me think about the last time we were there together…and what I went through after…”

“Am I right in thinking…you never told me what it was like right after…It must have been…difficult.”

I reached my hand out to Bree, bridging the narrow gap between the beds, and stroked my thumb over her skin.

“My world was gone – both my worlds. You were all I had left, and I had no guarantee I’d get to keep you either.”

Bree sat up and tucked her legs under herself cross-legged as she turned to face me.

“Can you…tell me about it?” Brianna entreated, leaning forward.

I nodded and smiled, thinking where to start as Brianna waited for story time to commence. I took a deep breath, and launched into a story I had thought about many times, but had never actually put into words before.

~~~~~

I was surprised to find a paved road so close to Craigh na Dun. It had been dirt roads and narrow lanes, hardly suitable for passage by car when I had left in 1945, at least this close to the hill itself. I was cold and wet, and I wasn’t sure how long I’d been lying in the grass at an almost vertical pitch just below the circle. I looked back down the hill to where I’d left Jamie, the remnant of a building we’d sheltered in the night before I left had been lost to time. I sighed mournfully, gulping at a sob.

“Oh, Jamie.”

I allowed myself that one moment of self-pity, knowing the abyss I could fall into if I allowed any more. The only thing I could do for Jamie now was to go on and keep his progeny safe.

I was taken aback at the appearance of the vehicles that passed me, and by the fact that not one had
stopped. I knew I must be a sight, but was I so ghastly as to be honked at? Perhaps I was.

I had stopped expecting a passing vehicle to stop, and was making headway on the shoulder of the road a sign had said led to Inverness. My body clock was so sideways I wasn’t sure if it was morning or afternoon, but my stomach was on a clock of its own, and while it couldn’t tell me what time it was, it could tell me it was sure I was pregnant.

I was quite indisposed when I heard an engine thrumming continuously behind me. There was the opening of a door and slow, gravely footsteps behind me.

“Can I be of some assistance?” a kindly, and decidedly young, voice asked me.

I turned and saw the outline of a man recoil.

“That bad, is it?” I asked, feeling I’d heard those words before, but incoming rather than outgoing.

“Sorry, Ma’am,” he said apologetically.

“Are ye hurt?”

His wonderful burr brought tears to my eyes.

“Not so much hurt, more lost.”

His minister’s garb had eluded me thus far, but the white of his collar flared against the sun.

“Could you take me to Inverness?” I asked, relatively sure I’d get there if conveyed by a man of the cloth, so long as he didn’t decide I was a witch!

“I’m headed there myself,” he happily recounted.

He pulled something from his pocket and aimed it at his car. I stared, amazed, as the whole side of the vehicle slid back to reveal a plush wide seat. I doubted anything I could do would look more like witchcraft than that.

“Were you in an accident?” the young man asked, looking at me through the rear view mirror for a few flash seconds.

“Not exactly,” I responded, not sure what I could tell him that wouldn’t have him taking me to the nearest hospital or police station.

“Here for the remembrance, then? Next year’s the big anniversary, two hundred and fifty years, by God, since…well, since.”

I sat quietly in the back of this strange conveyance doing some quick math in my head. If my figures were right – but that couldn’t be! The year was 1995? I was almost fifty years into my own future. My hand slipped to my belly and my other hand followed. I must have looked stricken because my driver looked concerned.

“Do ye need to…unburden yourself again?”

“No,” I replied, “Just glad to be off my feet…I realize I never asked your name.”

“I’m Jeremiah, Reverend Jem, as the children call me.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Claire.”
“Well, Claire, may I offer you the hospitality of the church? We’ve got facilities at your disposal should you want to clean up, and I’ll give no guarantee of quality, but we’ve got hot tea, or coffee if you prefer.”

I smiled. I must have looked bad, and pretty strange as well, but if there was a gathering for the anniversary of Culloden, I doubt I was the only woman dressed like she’d fallen straight out of the 1740’s.

“I suppose that would be a good idea. I don’t want to show up on my friend’s doorstep looking like I rolled all the way.”

“Someone’s expecting ye?”

“Not precisely,” I answered. “I’m not even sure they’re still alive,” I added under my breath.

~~~~~

It wasn’t long before we were pulling into a space in front of a non-descript off-white building.

“The hall isna much to look at, but she serves her purpose well,” The reverend, Jem, said as he helped me out of the car, seeming to read my mind, or at least my face, as the whole world seemed able to do.

I smiled kindly.

“Thank-you.”

“There’s nothing to thank,” he replied, taking my hands in his and clasping them tight for a moment. He exuded empathy.

When we reached the door, a large woman took me in hand and spirited me away to small room. I had no struggle in me, so I simply stood there as she loosened the laces of my dress and helped me remove my threadbare, if not tattered, garment.

“Such authentic details,” the woman chirped. “too bad it’s been ruined.”

I bit my lip and held back a new wave of tears.

“There you go, lass,” the woman said once I was down to my shift.

“The bath is just through here,” she signaled, pointing at a door next to the exit to the hallway.

“Can you handle things from here?” she asked.

I nodded vehemently, and she left me alone.

The hot water felt like a miracle, and I stood in it until I felt warmed through. I imagined the water was Jamie’s touch, stroking my skin, soothing my soul. I fought the urge to cry, but soon my tears were part of the water flow. I closed my eyes, and willed my mind to conjure Jamie’s voice. Whooshing water became soothing Gaelic slipping off the tongue of the man I would never forget, but never again would I feel his warm breath drifting in in advance of his soft lips dancing along my skin.

If only Jamie could have traveled through the stones with me…but even if he could have come, I’m not sure he would have. Despite how deeply he loves me, Jamie wouldn’t have liked the idea of slipping out in the middle of a fight to leave people he cared about to take up his slack.
As much as I wanted to remain enclosed in this warm, watery cocoon with my thoughts of Jamie, I had a place I had to go, and people whose status I needed to determine. I hoped beyond all hope that the Reverend Wakefield would be alive and of sound mind, for he might be the only one to believe my preposterous story. It would be too much to expect Mrs. Graham, though she might understand just that much better.

When I returned to the small bedroom, I found several hangers full of clothing hooked in the slightly open top drawer of the carved, heavy looking bureau. I had no idea what some of the pieces were, but I was at least able to sort what went on top from what was meant to go on the bottom.

After making myself decent, I set to detangling my hair as best as could be accomplished with the tools on the dressing table. I gave it a gallant try, but I was soon quite sure I needed the help of a professional, and that I would be making a significant sacrifice to the goddess of tangled tresses. I pulled it back best as I could, at least partially taming the rat’s nest I found attached to my scalp.

For the first moment since I woke below the stones, I had time to just breathe. My mind was blissfully blank for almost two minutes…and then I remembered.

“Oh…no, I can’t have lost them,” I called loudly.

I searched the room for the remnants of my dress, but found nothing. I bolted out into the hallway, trying to retrace my steps. I nearly knocked over the woman who had helped me undress and the tea tray she was toting. I grabbed her wrists after keeping her from dropping her tray.

“The dress I came in – what happened to it?” I interrogated the startled woman.

“It was naught but rags – it was tossed out.”

“Did anyone find a pocket? Anything hidden?”

“No, Ma’am – did ye lose something?”

My hands were beginning to shake, so I let her go. I fell back against the wall and felt my knees give way. I slid down the wall, my eyes glazing over.

“I lost them,” I sobbed.

“My last connection to my Jamie.”

“What have ye lost?” she asked with all sincerity, but I was lost in my own mind, remembering the feel of the pearls on my naked skin, remembering how Jamie opened his heart, his world, to me by giving me the last piece of his mother he still had. And I had lost it. I had come close many times, but the string of pearls had always come back to me, until now. My arms were hugged around me, thinking I no longer had something tangible to link me to Jamie.

I felt sick – but it wasn’t just an emotional feeling – I really felt sick. Several waves of nausea rippled through my body, but instead of dreading it, I began to smile. My tangible connection to Jamie was making its presence known, and I would do whatever was necessary to not lose this connection.

~~~~~

I gingerly made my way down the stairs, led by my nose. The smell of genuine coffee was on the wind, and luckily that was one smell that was agreeing with my stomach, for the moment. Before I
knew it, I was holding a warm mug between my palms, and sitting on a bench with my feet pulled up so I could rest my mug on my knees should the want arise.

The woman who had tried so hard to figure out what had gone missing came over, the remnants of my dress in her hands. Without a word she handed it over. My hands quickly probed through the fabric and located the secret pocket where I had secreted the pearls and several other valuables at different times. I thrust my hand to the bottom of it, and was alarmed to feel my pinkie slip right through the bottom corner seam. I sucked in a breath in horror, pulled the pocket out into the open and showed my hostess the reason for my distress. I wriggled my finger, making it obvious what had gone wrong.

“Oh, poor lass,” she consoled, pulling my head in at her waist. I had no more tears, but I let her hold me.

~~~~~

After extracting myself from the concern those around me were attempting to convey, and making my escape from the church hall, I walked slowly along the sidewalk, regaining my bearings, getting the feel of Inverness under my feet. It was as if I’d been at sea for three years, and I returned to a port I should know, but did not. I knew where I was, and in theory, when I was, though making myself believe it was still proving difficult.

I guess my body remembered where I was going even if my head did not, because I looked up and found myself at the manse. My heart skipped a beat, and I felt a chill. I just stared at the building – the wall of windows that lit the study, the door I had walked out leaving the Reverend Wakefield and Frank talking about his ancestry. If it had been of more interest to me, I might have never gone back to the stones, I might have never fallen through the looking glass, I might have never…

I was brought out of my head when I was buffeted by a group of passers-by, all talking, but not one to the person standing next to them. Each held some sort of device to their ears, carrying on completely separate and incomprehensible conversations, barely paying attention that there were people other than themselves in existence.

And then it was silent. I was alone with my thoughts on the sidewalk. I couldn’t stand there all day, so I stiffened my spine, and stepped up the walk, and rang the bell.

“May I help you?” a short, slightly round woman inquired.

Her hair was brown, but streaked with bits of silver. She looked like a bird who I’d disturbed from her nest.

“Um, yes…is the Reverend Wakefield here?” I asked.

“The reverend’s been gone some years now.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a cold pit in my stomach. “I suppose it was a long shot.”

My glass face gave away my distress, and suddenly the woman at the door was pulling me in, like I was a wayward egg she needed to tuck under herself to keep it safe.

“Come now,” she said as she pressed my head down on her shoulder.

“What would you have been needin’ of the Reverend? If it’s religious assistance you’re lookin’ for _“_
“No,” I warmly, but firmly replied. “It’s a personal matter. He helped trace my husband’s family line, and I was hoping he’d remember me.”

“You’d have been but a child when he passed!”

“I’m…older than I look,” I declared.

“Aye, but not too old. When is the child due?”

I felt my jaw drop, and I reflexively stood, towering over the woman. I was about to interrogate her about how she could possibly know I was pregnant when I barely knew it to be true and there were no outward signs, when a tall man came up the entry hall behind her. I looked up and up as he approached, his proximity making him far taller than I expected, but I could not take my eyes from his. They were the most striking green.

“Hallo there,” he greeted, just as caught in my eyes as I was in his.

His mouth dropped open just a bit as he stared deeper into my eyes. By the look on the woman’s face who had opened the door, he was her husband, and the fact that he was staring at another woman was leaving her off-put.

“Claire Randall?” he asked out of nowhere.

“And how would you be knowing that?” the woman asked, turning to admonish him with a look as well.

I held my tongue, but there was a curious sensation tip-toeing from my shoulder blades to the base of my spine.

“Yes,” I finally replied.

He extended both hands toward me.

“I’m Roger, Roger MacKenzie. I was Roger Wakefield the last time you saw me, but after the reverend passed, I took back my father’s name.”

Suddenly, I could see the little boy taken in by the Reverend Wakefield and raised by him and Mrs. Graham. He was no longer only knee-high, and the sweet round face was now chiseled and manly, but those eyes were unmistakable. I felt my eyes tearing up, and without thought I moved into his embrace.

As I cried in his arms he began to speak.

“Mrs. Graham always told me ‘when Claire comes back, she will be in need of your help.”

“What are you talking about, Roger?” the woman asked.

“Oh, Fee, give us a moment, will ye lass?” he lamented, then pulled me back to look at me again.

“So you did fall through time after all. There’s no other way you would still look the same.”

I was confused, as was his wife, but Roger was sure of his words, and he smiled broadly.

“They always come back,” he joyously recited.

~~~~~
Roger took me into the study and settled me in a chair near the fire. I was still feeling weepy, and confused. Everything was swirling around me. I pulled a throw blanket from the back of the chair and nestled back, wrapping myself, and drawing my knees up close.

“Fiona, could you get her something to drink and eat? She’s been through an ordeal,” Roger asked of his wife.

“Anyone can see that! Och, man, but what you doona see is she’s also with child.”

“Then Mrs. Graham was right, she is in need of my help – our help…Just get her something warm, aye?”

Fiona disappeared from the room and Roger came over and sat on the ottoman by my feet.

“I supposed you’ll be wondering how I recognized you…”

I simply looked into his eyes for a long moment.

“You said something about Mrs. Graham…is she gone, too?”

“I’m afraid so, my swan,” he replied, thumb pressed under my chin.

“But, she made sure you were not forgotten.”

Fiona came in with a tray. I was about to refuse, thinking she would offer me tea or coffee, and I’d had all I could swallow at the church hall, but instead she uncovered a tureen filled to the brim with what I soon learned was a sumptuous cock-a-leekie, the likes of which I had never encountered before. I took in a deep breath through my nose and my traitorous stomach growled for all to hear.

“Scoop her up a bowl, I’ll be but a minute,” Roger warmly said to Fiona.

“And where are you goin’?” she sharply asked the back of his head as he walked away.

By the time I had worked my way forward in my seat and turned to follow him with my eyes, a now fifty-something Roger MacKenzie was down on his hands and knees, probing at the depths of the bottom book shelf, grunting a bit as he retrieved something from behind the books. He sat back on his heels and smiled widely.

“Gotcha,” he proclaimed, looking over his shoulder. He struggled a bit to get back to his feet, but came back to the ottoman at my feet and sat back down, small box in the grasp of his right hand. Cigar or shoe box, I wasn’t sure right off, but he flipped the lid back and took something from it I had not seen since 1945 – the picture of Frank and me outside the registrar’s office the day we were married.

“After you disappeared, Mrs. Graham gave this to me, and told me to memorize the woman’s face in this picture. She wanted to be sure that someone would be waiting for you upon your return.”

I reached out and we jointly held the photo.

“She was that sure?”

“Aye, she was… I was but five years old, but I remembered meeting you. I never told anyone about the biscuit you snuck to me.”

“I wish I remembered that…sorry that I don’t,” I declared, looking from his eyes to the photo and back.
“I spent many a rainy afternoon lying on the carpet, looking at the picture, and then closing my eyes and trying to remember all the details of your face. I started referring to you as ‘my swan’ because the way you were holding your head made your neck look so long. It kinda became our code word for you, Mrs. Graham and I. She didna want the reverend to know anything about the picture, or remembering you – he didna believe the stories about the stones. I remember the pair of them arguing about the topic.”

While his body was calm, his eyes sparkled with child-like excitement.

“And you never thought to tell me all this?” Fiona chirped sharply, arranging her skirt like a ruffling grouse.

“She was my gran, after all.”

Roger looked up sideways at Fiona.

“I was never sure how to broach the subject, and once she was gone, there didna seem to be any reason to bring up something that had not happened, and might not happen. There was enough talk about the things she’d done. I didna want to be the cause of greater disruption.”

“Talk? About Mrs. Graham? Because she danced at the stones?” I asked, looking from one face to the other in front of me.

I saw Fiona’s eyes open wide, and her lip quivered ever so slightly.

“You knew?” she asked, then raised her shoulders like a chill had come over her.

“I saw her,” I ventured, “The night before I…disappeared. Frank and I went to Craigh Na Dun to watch the dancers, and I spotted Mrs. Graham among them.”

Fiona reached her hands out to me and I took hold of them.

“She taught me to take her place as the caller, and I have taught my daughters the same. She clearly saw something in you.”

I smiled kindly, a feeling of warmth passing from her through our hands. I could feel the inner chill leave my body.

“Sorry I never said anything, Fee,” Roger apologized. “There was never a right time…until now.”

“We’ll talk,” Fiona addressed to Roger, with a smile that belied darker feelings.

She turned back to me.

“Now, we need to get you set up with a room.”

I started to shake my head.

“I don’t want to impose – “

“Nonsense – do ye have any other place to go?”

“No,” I replied with a bit of a tremble in my voice.

“Well then, we have room to spare…and apparently a debt to repay. You will stay, no argument.”
I knew there was no arguing with a mother hen as fierce as this woman, and frankly, I needed a little motherly love.

~~~~~~

The next morning I was sitting in the kitchen having a nearly overwhelming breakfast at Fiona’s direction while Roger sat across the table, tea spoon ringing in his cup as he stirred. He was allowed simple tea and toast, but Fiona kept plying me with course after course, the mother hen fattening up her new chick.

I was relieved when a knock on the door took Fiona’s attention. I smirked when Roger took my plate and claimed a good portion of what was on it.

“She won’t let me eat like this any longer,” he explained.

“My kingdom for tea and toast,” I replied.

Roger laughed and reached out a hand to pat mine.

“Poor dear, my wife’s not one to back down…shame we don’t have a dog to sneak the unwanted scraps to,” he leaned forward and whispered.

I smiled, and actually felt it. I guess I could still feel simple happiness, even in the wake of all that’d happened.

“You’re here in time for breakfast,” I heard Fiona say to whomever was at the door.

“Roger, pour a cuppa, our eldest is blessing us with a visit,” she said as she came back to her stove.

“So imagine my surprise…” a male voice trailed off, following Fiona into the room, and I looked up, the shock on my face clear as anything.

“Good lord – how’d you…This is who you were coming to see?”

“Not precisely,” I answered, now seeing both Fiona and Roger looking at me.

Jem came and crouched by my knee.

“You look much better,” he commented, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze before settling into his own chair.

“Does ev’ry one know you but me?” Fiona asked. “How in hell do ye know my boy?”

“Mam, I wish you’d not evoke hell so often – I am a man of the cloth, after all, and not a few members of the church already think ye a heathen, and doona trust me.”

“Jeremiah MacKenzie, a man of God you may be, but God himself ye ain’t. So how is it you know Mrs. Randall, then?”

“Mrs. Randall? – you mean Claire?”

“She does,” I clarified, “But I’m actually Claire Fraser now…You son was kind enough to drive me from near Craigh Na Dun. I never could have made the walk.”

“If I’d known this was your destination, I would have brought you straight on,” Jem chattered, taking the cup of tea his father had poured and taking a sip.
I smiled kindly, but felt I better watch my step.

“So, you’re friends of my parents?” he asked solicitously.

“I was actually looking for Reverend Wakefield when I came here, but I found these lovely people instead, and happily a warm welcome.”

“I must say, it does seem to be kismet that you would be brought to my parent’s house, for it made finding you much easier.”

Roger and I looked at Jem, puzzled.

“I came back to the church hall to check on how you’d settled in, and was told no one knew of your whereabouts.”

“I’m sorry I…couldn’t handle being around so many people. They were all well-meaning…but…”

“But you needed to be alone with your thoughts?” Jem projected.

I nodded and fought back a want to cry. But then another urge came to the surface, one I could not fight back down. I dashed from the room and into the nearest lavatory, Fiona’s lavish breakfast lost. I made my way back to the kitchen, holding doorframes and walls, and feeling weak. I interrupted a conversation with my entry to the room, and Jem took me by the arm until I was settled back at the table.

“Sorry,” I offered. “It has nothing to do with the food – the baby – “

“Baby?” Jem repeated.

“Aye,” Roger answered for me.

“Why did you think I was tossing my cookies by the side of the road?” I asked.

All I got in reply was a sheepish grin.

“Um, well,” Jem began, “As I was tellin’ Mam when I arrived – the story about pickin’ you up, by the way, I was cleanin’ out the van, and something was caught in the seat, and I knew the moment I saw it, it was very valuable, and needed to be returned to its owner post haste.”

As he spoke those words, he slowly drew his cupped hand from his coat pocket. As the string of Scotch pearls unfurled from his hand I gasped. Suspended over his hand, I could barely bring myself to touch them. I was afraid it was an illusion, and that if I reached out to them, my hand would disturb whatever eye-boggling trick was making me see them.

I put my hand behind the strand and they lay across my palm – absolutely real. I cupped my hand and Jem released them to me.

“They came back to me,” was all I could think to say as I leaned my head into Jem’s shoulder and felt him put an arm around me as I began to sob.

~~~~~

Fiona basically took over my life for the next few months. She made sure I ate well, and that I kept any appointments with the doctors she’d set me up with. I know she wanted me to talk to someone about my experiences, but she understood that most people would think I was nuts, so she did not begrudge my long talks with Roger. And actually, talking to Roger was better than therapy because
he could find me answers.

He began looking for any trace or mention of Jamie. Each time he found a tidbit of information, I’d pore over it with him. And I broke into tears the first time he found a mention of Jamie that dated from after Culloden. Knowing that he’d survived that day lifted a weight from my mind that had been sitting there like an anchor from the moment I’d left his embrace.

“Oh, Jamie…” I sighed, placing my hand on my growing belly.

“Please, keep looking…I need to know what happened to him after I left.”

“Of course,” Roger said with a nod.

~~~~~

Bree was crying, but trying to hold it in when I’d finished telling her of the first few days and months I’d lived in 1995. I was more reserved than I thought I would be, almost detached from the story for some reason. I’d relived it so many times, but it took on a different tone this time. Jamie was no longer a memory, no longer something I could only tell Bree about – he was inches away, the heat of his body reaching out.

I felt a large, warm hand slowly slide around my hip. What I took to be Jamie sleeping was merely Jamie in deep repose, but listening to every word. I put my hand on top of his.

“I’m glad to know you were in such loving hands,” Jamie told me, “I’ve heard ye speak of Roger before, but didna know how much I owe him, or Fiona.”

“I would kiss you if it wouldn’t pierce my face,” I replied, looking at the acupuncture needles adorning him.

I was struck once again by the resemblance between Jamie and Brianna, and not just the physical similarities. The way they displayed their emotions was…I couldn’t find a word that truly did it justice. It made me realize Jamie was never completely separated from me. The child he gave me had kept the door open all these years, and hadn’t allowed me to think him gone.

~~~~~
We are slowly closing in on Jamie and Claire's wedding, but like a wedding, there are so many little details I need to work in before the actual ceremony. This was meant to be the chapter before the wedding, but I had to split it into two because of what still needed to be written. I don't want to leave something out by mistake that might be vital to the storyline, because there's some BIG stuff happening soon, but it is all dependent on a few key scenes, and I want to get those right. Plus, I am closing in on 400 pages, which means there are about 200 more pages already written, with so much more to fill in.

Jamie, Brianna and I were enjoying our complimentary meal as we waited to be called for our flight when I heard Bree shyly launch into a question.

“So…what year was it…when you came through? We heard mom’s side last night, and I’d really like to know what it was like for you,” Brianna haltingly asked her father.

“Och, lass, I didna come through the stones. They doona call out for me.”

“But…then…how?”

“I guess we should have sat you down and told you everything once you stopped thinking your mam was crazy,” Jamie said, eyes wide open.

Jamie reached out for Brianna’s hand across the table.

“Your mam is the time traveler. My situation is a bit different. I’m…for lack of a better word…immortal. I don’t know that I will never die, but so far, each of my deaths has spawned a new beginning rather than an end.”

Brianna looked like she’d just been hit by a gust of unholy wind as she sat there with her mouth ajar.

“How many?” she gulped out.

“Lives?” Jamie replied.

Bree nodded, although it looked more like a random shaking of her whole body.

“At least a half dozen – maybe even a full one by now, I’ve lost count. I’ve been looking for you and your mam for almost 270 years. If this is the last lifetime I get, it will all be worth it to spend it with Claire and you.”

He clasped her chin with one of his great paws.
“Had I known what year your mam had found herself in, I would have come. I would have raised you from when you were a bairn. It tears my heart out to have lost those years with you, to have not been there.”

“Are you OK, Bree?” I asked.

She looked at me as if I had just awakened her from a fever dream.

“I didn’t just imagine that, did I?” she queried in a scratchy voice.

Jamie and I both shook our heads.

“This is gonna take some getting used to,” she finally pronounced.

Our connecting flight from Keflavik Airport in Iceland to Edinburgh was called before Brianna had the chance to really process what Jamie just told her. She was quiet for this leg of our journey, and I hoped that meant she was sorting things out in her mind. We really couldn’t talk about my time traveling or Jamie’s immortality aboard the plane without risking someone overhearing, so perhaps Brianna’s need to internalize her thoughts was for the best.

The short flight that actually took us into Inverness saw Brianna a little more animated, as she became accustomed to the idea that she was the offspring of a time traveler and an immortal. She spent some time simply staring at Jamie. In some ways, I think learning of Jamie’s immortality helped explain some questions Bree had had from the first time she laid eyes on him – like his youthful appearance. I think I know the exact moment her mind came to terms with what Jamie told her in Iceland. She took his hand, smiled at him, leaned her head on his shoulder, and let out a deep breath. He unconsciously tilted his head against hers and they drowsed in their seats.

~~~~~

We finally arrived in Inverness in the wee hours of Friday morning, feeling bedraggled and quite worn out. Fiona had said to call no matter what time we landed, but I felt a twinge of guilt at calling this late. I wanted to shush the phone with each ring, for it sounded so loud and disturbing.

“Hallo?” a familiar male voice cheerfully exuded. “Claire?” he asked before I could get a word out.

“Yes…we finally landed,” I mustered as my response.

“I’m on my way.”

“No, no, we’ll take a taxi. No need for you to come out in this weather.”

“Nonsense, Swan. It won’t take but a few minutes.”

“Roger, please, I’d rather have you safe at home to greet us.”

“If you insist. Fiona’s got the kettle on. I’m sure you could do with a nibble. Oh, and welcome home, again.”

“Thank you,” I said with a tired smile.

“You talked him around?” Jamie asked.

I nodded.

“Yes.”
“Good,” he replied, pressing a quick kiss to my forehead. “Bree’s finding us a taxi, or some-such way of getting us there, using some kind of APP on her phone.”

It wasn’t long before we had piled our luggage in the back and piled our bodies into the back seat of a rather spacious van by European standards. I was nearly on Jamie’s lap, but I didn’t mind. It was a very nippy middle of the night, with that pervasive Scottish dampness sinking into us, but the heat in our hired car was enough to counteract its effects. I lost track of time, but it felt like nearly an hour before we drew up in front of the old manse.

I expected a quick bite to eat in the dim, overnight lighting of Fiona’s kitchen, and then falling into a bed, but as we began unloading the van, it was as if we had triggered every light in the neighborhood. I was forced to shield my eyes for a moment.

“You made it safe!” I heard Roger say as he came down the walk toward us. “Claire,” he said, beaming a smile and opening his arms to give me a hug. I gladly fell into his embrace and he kissed me on the cheek. He didn’t linger too long with me once he saw Jamie. Roger had his hand extended and had zeroed in on him.

“You must be Jamie Fraser. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Roger had the over-drawn smile of an excited child on his face as he exuberantly greeted him. Jamie gave me a smirk, took Roger’s hand, and pulled the man into his embrace.

“The pleasure is mine,” I heard Jamie say. “I can’t thank you enough for keeping Claire and Brianna safe. For giving me the chance to find them.”

Jamie let Roger go, but gave him a good pat on the back.

“And Bree,” Roger greeted, trying to give her a hug the way he always had. She tensed up and became as stiff as a board. She released an audible gasp, Roger letting her go, not understanding her reluctance until he clearly remembered what had happened to her.

“Sorry,” he whispered, getting a shaky nod from Bree.

I watched as Bree very carefully made sure her carry-on was hung across her chest in a defensive position to ward off any other potential hugs that were surely headed her way.

My poor girl. These were the times I most wished she could be comfortable in her own skin.

Fiona had been watching from the door, and intercepted Brianna as she got to the house.

“Och, Bree, my how you’ve grown,” she happily said as she looked up into Brianna’s eyes.

“May I?” she asked, opening her arms.

Bree let Fiona put her arms around her, but kept her own arms against her chest as a second buffer, and stiffened the same way she had with Roger. I could tell she was fighting with all she had not to run away.

“Remember me?” Jem questioned.

“Ye-ah,” Bree replied, quaver in her voice.

“Mam is right, you’ve grown up a lot since the last time you were here.”

Jem leaned in to hug her as well, but it was too much for Bree. She held her hands out flat to him
and cried, “No!” as she circled away from him. She backed into Fiona, whirled quickly, whispered, “Bathroom?” and moved quickly up the hall to the nearest lavatory.

I stepped up and gave both Fiona and Jem quick hugs.

“She’s not a hugger…not after…”

Jem closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. “I’m sorry, I forgot,” Jem apologetically murmured.

Jamie was right behind me.

“James Fraser,” he introduced, proffering his hand.

“Jeremiah MacKenzie,” Jem returned, accepting Jamie’s hand.

“She hasna let me hug her yet either,” he said with a reassuring smile.

Our luggage was hauled into the rooms we’d be using until we checked into our hotel.

“We weren’t expecting a receiving line at this hour,” I told Fiona as we headed back into the kitchen.

“It’s just me, Roger, and Jem.”

“I know,” I said, looking down.

“Bree used to be so open,” Fee said with a shake of her head.

“I’m afraid that all ended after the attack – She lets me hold her, but…”

“But we’re…strangers, for all intents and purposes, are we not?”

“I’m afraid so,” I replied, finally taking a seat at the table.

Jamie, Roger and Jem came back from who knows where one after another and took up places around the table.

“So, we’ll get that…crate of yours opened up tomorrow – well, later today,” Roger launched into.

Jamie blushed a bit. I think a few words about his choice of shipping container may have been exchanged.

Jamie left one chair between us open, and he wasn’t saving it for Fiona. He sought to provide Bree a safe feeling spot, between us, when she was ready to join us.

“Claire,” Jem beamed, “there is no way it has been twenty years since I first encountered you – and you look younger than when you were here…what is it…six years ago now? Whatever you’re doin’, keep it up.”

Now I blushed, and Jamie smiled at me.

Brianna stealthily made her way to the table and slid into the seat between us.

“There she is, the little wren all grown up,” Roger articulated as he greeted Bree again.

She flashed the slightest smile, but there was such sadness in her eyes. Brianna’s return to Scotland was not off to the best start.
“We have plenty, so please, eat up,” Fiona insisted.

There were plates of small sandwiches, sliced fruits with dips, and nuts and cookies and finger cakes covering the table. Coffee and tea were on stand-by.

“Do you have any ginger ale?” Bree asked shyly.

“Is your stomach upset?” I asked, putting my hand on her shoulder.

“A little.”

“I’m afraid that’s my fault,” Jamie offered. “Claire’s got a steel trap for a stomach, but the lass seems to have inherited my inability to handle turbulence.”

“Was the flight rough?” Roger asked, hoping to draw Brianna into the conversation.

“There was a cross wind,” she simply stated.

“Oh,” Roger said with a nod.

While we discussed the topic, and I wondered if it was the plane rides, or Bree facing down so many people wishing to hug her, Fiona opened and poured out half a small glass bottle of ginger ale into a tumbler and handed it to Brianna. She sipped it slowly through the bend-y straw Fee had placed in it – something from a bit of a gone-by era as far as I was concerned, but I didn’t have grandchildren spilling their drinks due to an inability to find their own mouths!

Everything felt a bit strained. There was a great deal of smiling among the rest of us. Although we’d stayed in touch, we didn’t fall into a natural rhythm. I hoped after some sleep the awkwardness would wear off.

Bree was actually asleep in her chair when Jamie and I had finished taking the edge off our hunger. I gently touched her hand.

“Bree,” I whispered, not wanting to startle her awake. She’d dealt with enough adrenaline today.

“Mom?” she sleepily responded. “…Oh, Scotland, right?”

“Uh-huh,” I hummed back at her.

“I’ll say my goodnights, then,” Jem softly vocalized, “Ruth has to be up early, so I best get myself home, and be quiet about it.”

“Jem,” I said, turning to reach across the table to give him a hug, “Tell Ruth I said hello.”

“Aye, I will. She’s quite looking forward to spending some time with ye while you’re here…and Brianna? She’s always glad to see you, too.”

Bree nodded absently and grunted like a tranquilized buffalo.

“Time to get these travelers to bed,” Roger quipped as light laughter circled the room.

I steered Brianna to her room by her shoulders, and then let Jamie steer me by the shoulders to our bed. I heard Jamie exhale heavily and I wrapped his arms around me like a spare blanket. I don’t remember another thing.
Morning came early, or I should say, early afternoon got here before I knew what had happened. Jamie was sitting in an overstuffed chair with his heels crossed on the far corner of the mattress, watching me.

“Aren’t you tired?” I moaned.

“Aye, a bit, but I couldna sleep.”

“Have you been downstairs this morning?”

“Aye – Fiona puts quite the spread out for breakfast – and then doesna let Roger eat! They have…a unique relationship, do they not? From one minute to the next you canna be sure if they will kill each other or ravage each other,” Jamie related with a deep blush on his cheeks, and a glorious glint in his eyes.

“Passion is a double-edged sword,” I quipped.

“And you would know, Sassenach.”

I smiled at his comment as a wave of heat went through my body. I turned over and sat half-way up, leaning on my elbow.

“Was Bree up yet?”

“If she was, she didna come down to eat. I think we left her comfort zone back in Boston.”

“I was afraid of that…part of me hoped that being around people she used to let hug her might let it happen unconsciously, but alas…”

“I think she handled herself quite well, considering. She will get there. A day will come and something will change, and she’ll be able to open her heart…and her arms”

“I hope so. She deserves to be free of what happened to her.”

Jamie crawled up the bed and settled in behind me.

“Everything in its proper time, Sassenach,” he whispered in my ear. “I waited, and waited…and waited – but then one day, there you were, and it was like my heart began to beat anew.”

I smiled and hummed with my eyes closed. His words were delicious. I wanted to linger all day, but I knew I must be testing Fiona’s patience by now. With a regretful sigh, I turned to face Jamie. I traced his cheek with my hand.

“I’m afraid I must start the day.”

Jamie gave me the sweetest kiss.

“Aye.”

Bree was seated at Fiona’s table when Jamie and I came down.

“You back for another breakfast?” Fiona cackled, seeing Jamie once again seated at the table.
“Merely here for moral support,” he bantered back with a smile.

“I like this one, Claire,” Fiona confirmed. “He’s more than just a pretty face – though he does have that as well.”

I found myself watching Brianna’s reactions, and I could see surreptitious enjoyment flash across her face as Jamie and Fiona teased each other.

“I actually wasna expecting any of you to make it out and about until dinner – You will be up for some light entertaining tonight?” Fiona inquired.

“I’m sure we’ll all be quite prepared by dinner time,” I assured her.

“And you, Bree?” she also asked.

“I’m good,” she softly replied.

“So, who’s coming tonight?” I asked.

“Well, Jem and Ruth for sure. The other boys are both away. Rabbie’s still off at the research station, and Wake has a job keeping him away until after the wedding, or he’d have been here for sure. Janet and Abby have so much to wrangle, they canna even be sure what they will be doing by dinner time, but you will see their shining faces at the wedding, with husbands and children in tow.”

“Good to know we won’t be standing at the front of a nearly empty church then – not that it matters, mind you, since our first wedding wasn’t well attended.”

“Shot-gun weddings seldom are,” Roger joked as he entered the far end of the kitchen.

“I think sword-point wedding might be more accurate,” Brianna quipped, catching us all off guard.

“That’s the girl we know,” Roger resolved, catching the sly look on Brianna’s face as she tried to keep her façade.

She bit her lip to hold back her smile.

~~~~

Once Fiona had put her kitchen to bed from the second breakfast rush, she produced a folder and placed it on the table in front of her.

“Are we ready to go over some details?”

I felt like I was in front of a strict school marm who would strike me with a ruler should I disappoint in my answer. I suddenly found myself placing my feet solidly on the floor beneath me and sitting up straight, attentive as possible.

“Good,” Fiona sharply replied to my body language, and she shifted her eyes to Brianna. A silly smirk quickly retreated from her face as Fiona used the powers of her mind. Even Jamie checked his smile in favor of a more sober expression.

Fiona opened the folder before her. I almost expected to hear it creak like an old book when she laid the two sides flat to the table.

“Tomorrow, Ruth and I will accompany the two of you for the final fitting of your wedding dress,
Claire, and hopefully the final fitting of the outfit we discussed for you, Brianna.”

“What did you…?”

“Doona fash, lass. I found something that could be remade into a quite appropriate show-stopper. And I’ll not say another word about it until the fitting…Now, you will be staying with us here through the weekend, checking into your ‘pre-wedding’ hotel on Monday, although I still doona see why you can’t stay with us straight through.”

“That would be an awful imposition on you, Fiona.”

“Nonsense. Ten or so days is nothing compared to the months you spent here waiting for Brianna to arrive. You didna wear out your welcome then!”

“Fee, trust me, we’ll just get underfoot. I want you to still like us by the time this wedding happens.”

Claire tilted her head, seeing she had not done an iota of convincing Fiona.

“Trust me, Fee. We’ll be traipsing all over the area, coming and going at unpredictable hours – arriving so late as we did must have thrown off your normal schedule. I don’t want to be responsible for disrupting your life.”

“It’s a disruption I’ve been looking forward to from the moment you told me this man was back in your life.”

“Fee?” Brianna reluctantly interrupted.

“Aye?”

“We already paid for the rooms.”

“Spoken as a true Scot,” Fiona sighed, “Could we not keep you for the duration?”

Bree smiled, but shook her head as her answer.

“Alright, then, on Monday ye have a meeting with your priest that Jem has arranged – some official paperwork will be the culmination should Father McBride find you acceptable for marriage, and if not, Jem will gladly perform a Protestant service for ye.”

Jamie was about to protest when Fiona cut him off.

“Or you can continue to live in sin as you have been.”

Her stern look of warning slowly spawned a smirk, and Jamie nodded as his smile held back a laugh.

“You can be as involved or as uninvolved as ye wish when it comes to the flowers and the guest list. But now would be the time to give me any additions to that list. I believe there are only three names you’ve offered me – is there no one else?”

“Well, not here in Scotland,” Claire answered. “I wish a few of the people I work with could be here, but they’re in Boston, and other than that, I really don’t have any friends left here, other than your family, Fee. Jamie, can you think of anyone else you want to invite? Could Griff alter his plans for a few days?”
“He’ll be in the middle of the ocean by now,” Jamie said with a shake of his head.

“Fee, your family will do fine to stand up for us,” Claire promised as she reached across the table with both her hands to rest them over Fiona’s hands. “We know we’ll be surrounded by love.”

“Och, you’ll make me cry,” Fiona said, shaking off the threatening tears.

Fiona looked down and closed her eyes for a serious pause to regain herself.

“I have a few notes here, jotted in the margins, of things you mentioned you’d like to do…let me see…tour Lallybroch? Aye?”

Jamie and Claire nodded, Jamie reaching out his hand and engulfing hers.

“Trip to visit Andrew Rhys-Jones?”

“He’s been a…long-time friend to me,” Jamie informed.

“Why is he not on your guest list, then?”

“The man is in his nineties, and while he is rather spry, he prefers to have guests, not be one!” Jamie explained.

“Well, you have the better part of a week before the wedding to do whatever you wish, but I will be quite disappointed if ye don’t join us for dinner most nights,” Fiona warned.

“I promise, we’ll give you plenty of notice each day of our plans, unless something unexpected comes up,” Claire assured her.

“See that you do…now shoo, the three of you. I have a dinner to get started on.”

“We could help?” Claire offered.

“I’ll not hear of it. It is my kitchen, and the day I canna produce a dinner is the day they pry the spatula from my hand – away with ye.”

~~~~~

The whole house was beginning to smell wonderful as Fiona’s dinner was taking shape. Fiona employed Brianna to set the table, and even let her stir a pot or two despite her stern warning that we not interfere with the creation of this meal. Jamie and I spent our time languishing together on the couch in the study. Roger was in and out, checking on the fireplace, asking us if we needed anything, and shifting in and out of the kitchen attempting to sample components of the meal until Fiona loudly threatened him with a potato masher.

Jem and Ruth turned out to be the only ones who could shift their schedules enough to join us, so it was to be dinner for seven.

We all started out in the study, but it became a matter of competing conversations until no one could understand what anyone else was saying. That led to a division along gender lines.

~~~~~

Roger, Jem, and Jamie headed into Roger’s den since Fiona would not stray far from the study due to its proximity to the kitchen.
“I keep the good whisky in here anyway,” Roger revealed as they arrived at the door, “Though probably no so good as you may have imbibed,” he said, turning to Jamie.

Jamie smiled sheepishly.

“Remind me before we leave to send you one of my reserve casks – but I warn ye – its fumes alone could render you drunk – perhaps even set ye on fire!”


They drank in silence for a bit, the father and son not really knowing what to say to Jamie, as they barely knew him beyond what Claire had told them.

As they were men, the silence was easier to live with than to break.

~~~~~

After a few drinks, not only were they talking, they were regaling each other with some of the best and worst jokes they’d heard over the years – sometimes all rolled into one.

Jem launched into one particularly long story joke, after informing Jamie of its source – the priest who meant to marry Jamie and Claire, all details permitting.

“And so the man reaches the gate to his yard, hours after his wife had sent him out to get these snails.”

Jem stopped to take a breath and sip from his glass.

“And he drops the bag…Snails are everywhere – on the sidewalk, up the path to his door – just scattered far and wide – And his wife opens the door! She’s livid – ready to eat her husband alive in lieu of the escargot she had planned.”

They were all already laughing a bit under the influence of several glasses of whisky.

“She starts cutting into him – ‘Where have ye been? I ask this one simple thing! What took ye the hell so long?’ And without missing a beat, despite his state of ineb…inebri…drunkenness, the man turns toward the back of where the snails scattered, sweeps his hand along and calls out, ‘come along, lads, we’re nearly there!’.”

“I hope the hell he confessed after telling that one,” Roger blasphemed.

Jamie laughed and drained his glass.

“I have found that often it is the clergy who will tell the most off-color jokes – although sailors and prostitutes can usually hold their own.”

Roger laughed as he pointed at his son, seeing the truth of Jamie’s words.

“I would dare-say you’ve encountered a number of each in your life,” Roger acknowledged of Jamie, alluding to his long life, which sobered the three of them considerably. Jamie nodded heavily.

The room fell silent yet again. All three breathed deeply, seeming to stare at their own shoes.

About ten minutes into the quiet reflection, Roger picked up the decanter and offered, “Another whisky?”
Two glasses beside his own were quickly proffered and filled half-way.

The jocularity had fizzled away, seguing into thoughts of times gone by.

As curious as the MacKenzie men were about the lives and times Jamie had existed through, Jamie was the one asking questions, wanting to know all he could about how Claire coped in the earliest days of their separation by centuries, and what they remembered of Brianna’s beginnings.

“You want to know it all, do you not?” Roger queried, “You want to capture the essence of your infant child, and of Claire at that time – that wonderful, ephemeral space in time.”

Roger leaned in close to Jamie’s ear, and tapped him on the chest with the back of his hand.

“That’s why Fee and I kept at it – to try to recapture that feeling – it was different every time.”

Jamie nodded empathetically, knowing he wanted the impossible – to capture time.

~~~~~

“So…you have how many now?” Claire asked Ruth once the men headed for the den and things quieted in the study.

“Six – the last one was quite unexpected.”

“I think I remember you saying that about number five as well!” Claire recalled.

“Well, he was less unexpected, but we did name him ‘Noah Mhor’. I guess the joke was on me,” Ruth chuckled.

“I can see why you wouldn’t want to bring the wee one, but…”

“Convincing teenagers to come to anything on a Friday night is a struggle not worth engaging in. My eldest, Iona, she doesna mind playing mom to let me out time to time.”

“She’s eighteen, right? Bree just turned twenty – I can’t believe how fast it’s gone by. Fiona, you must be overjoyed with so many grandchildren. I remember how you lamented only having one youngster about when I left for Boston with Brianna.”

“Och, it’s lovely…and when I’ve have my fill, they can go home, but then I miss having them about. For almost a year, though, I get the chills thinkin’ about it – there were thirteen of them!”

Ruth and Claire laughed while Brianna smiled uneasily. Talk of babies wasn’t something that Bree was interested in. As an only child, Bree had never even held a baby, and the thought did not cross her mind, except occasionally to think ‘God I hope no one hands one of those to me’. Claire turned to look at Brianna, seeing the kind of glazed over pleasant expression she took on when she was not the least interested in what was being said, but had to look friendly.

“We must be boring you to tears,” Ruth addressed to Bree.

“Me?” Brianna answered, tapping her fingers to her upper chest.

“You hide it well, but somehow I think even now you’d rather be playing with a box of Legos,” Ruth burbled.

Brianna blushed as only Jamie’s daughter could – cheeks and ear tips blazing a brilliant red. She bit her bottom lip and nodded in reluctant agreement.
“Excuse me a moment,” Fiona requested, going to check on the meal.

When she came back in, instead of taking up her former seat, she began the walk to the other door.

“I’ve taken the main course out of the oven, and put the scones and dessert in. I’m going to tell the men we’ll be eating soon.”

~~~~~

“It’s hard to believe that striking girl in the other room is also the first bairn my wife ever held,” Jem mused.

“They grow up so fast,” Roger sighed.

“To our daughters,” Jem said with the raising of his glass.

“And to the women who gave them to us,” Jamie added.

“Here, here,” Roger interjected, and the three of them drained their glasses, each thinking of the wives and daughters that filled their lives.

The collective sigh of three men sounded as they stood with their backs to the fire, the mantle propping them up by the shoulders.

Fiona stood just outside the door, her heart warming, and a glowing heat coming to her cheeks.

“So…” Roger finally broke the silence with, “Where were we?” he asked, taking a sip of his freshly refilled whisky.

“I don’t know about you, but I think I’ve had my fill of bad jokes, Da.”

“Perhaps we should lend a hand in the kitchen,” Jamie offered.

“I wouldnna dare get in Fiona’s way. The last time I offered to help her in the kitchen, she got so distracted we ended up eating scones of stone!”

The warmth in Fiona’s heart and on her face quickly chilled, and her ire was piqued.

“Roger MacKenzie!” Fiona howled, one foot stomping to display her anger as she dried her hands off on her apron. She stood in the doorway, scowling.

“Och, I’ve stepped in it now,” a cowering Roger quavered, using Jamie and Jem as cover against his irked wife.

“You can’t hide behind them forever,” Fiona fired at her husband.

Hearing Fiona’s angry squall, Claire, Brianna, and Ruth arrived at the door to the den.

“What?” Claire quickly asked, looking between Fee and the assemblage of men by the fireplace as she stepped into the room. Brianna and Ruth each took a step into the room behind Claire.

“The whisky has loosened my tongue,” Roger apologized, now emerging from behind Jem and Jamie.

“And I spoke the forbidden words.”
“Forbidden words?” Brianna asked.

Roger tilted his head in apology and question toward Fiona until she felt compelled to acquiesce.

“Fine – tell them – tell them about how you made a joke of my ignominity!”

“Mam,” Jem empathized, heading to comfort his mother.

Jamie invited Claire and Brianna to flank him by the fireplace with a flick of his head, and Roger stayed low as he went and sat on the arm of his recliner.

“Well,” Roger said, mouth a bit drawn. “Where to begin. We’re all familiar with the Stone of Scone?” he nodded, looking for agreement. All heads nodded except Brianna’s obvious shake of ‘no’.

“It’s a big stone that was used in the coronations of Scottish royalty – stolen and used by the British for the same thing. The Scots wanted it back so badly it was stolen and hidden for a time. Eventually, it was returned to its rightful place, in Scotland,” Claire interposed, much to Jamie’s Scottish pride.

“Right, Claire, well… I got in the way of Fiona’s supper preparations one night, causing her to over-cook a batch of biscuits. They were hard as stone, and only nearly as tasty. So I joked that perhaps if we switched one of her Scones of Stone for the Stone of Scone that maybe no one would notice the change.”

There was a smattering of laughter followed by an empathetic undertow of commiseration.

“I’m sorry, Fee,” Claire said with a smile, “but I think Roger was quite clever to come up with that on the spur of the moment. We’ve all had those moments in the kitchen. Sometimes I’m surprised I was able to produce meals Bree could stomach.”

“Who says I did?” Brianna retorted, “Why do you think I learned to bake?”

“Poor dear,” Ruth cooed, “But it doesn’t seem to have stunted ye’re growth any!”

Jamie burst into laughter, getting an elbow flapped toward his chest from Claire.

“So, where were ye Christmas of ’50, Jamie? Bringin’ the stone home, by any chance?”

Jamie found himself the center of all attention. He looked about, his all too familiar sheepish grin on his lips as his cheeks and ear tips pinked like beacons.

“I was aware of the… liberation… but I wasna part of it,” he affirmed with a jaunty tilt of his head.

The lull in the voices was slashed as Fiona yelled out, “Mac na galla”, and dashed from the room.

“Might I suggest you not come up with a joke for whatever part of the meal she has to rescue this time,” Ruth encouraged, placing a hand on Roger’s shoulder.

“Tang dhut, a ghraidh,” he said with a nod.

~~~~~
As with a real life wedding, nailing down those last few details to get everything just right can take longer than thought - that's what happened with this story - and those few words I thought I had to write to fill in what is needed before the wedding scene have blossomed into several more chapters. But I'd hate to skip over any details that I might need to refer to in the future. Please bear with me. In this chapter, if I can make it work, I have sketches of Claire's dress and Brianna's outfit for the wedding.

Brianna brought the pairs of leggings and shirts Fiona had directed her to bring in order to properly pair it with the garment she had constructed for my girl to wear to see her parents wed. My daughter had never been one to be ‘girly’. She eschewed skirts, hated anything that restricted her movement. I can only imagine if she had had to wear a corset and ankle length skirts, and I know for a fact some of the low-cut bodices I had donned in Scotland and France would have embarrassed her to look at, let alone wear.

Last night’s dinner, and the time for conversation before-hand, had allowed Brianna a chance to be some-what comfortable with Ruth, seeing as she remembered Bree’s penchant for building, and disinterest in babies.

“What?” Brianna asked, as Ruth once more beamed at her.

“I guess I find it hard to believe you’re so grown up,” Ruth replied.

“I’m not that much older than your first daughter.”

“True, but I raised her, saw all the changes. And now that I’ve seen your Da, it’s remarkable how much you resemble him.”

I came out from the dressing room, having been listening the whole time.

“I did tell you she was her father’s spitting-image.”

“I know, but saying it and seeing it have quite a different impact. Oh, look at you,” she reacted to my dress.

“Did I not tell you it would look magnificent on her – those colors, with her skin and hair.”
Fiona was right. The deep burgundy velvet of the skirt and bodice were set off perfectly by the sleeves and insets in a color that was being called ‘sand’. It was a creamy pale yellow, like fresh butter with a saffron hint of depth. The shoes I’d brought from home. They were a metallic pewter color, and when the light struck them, they had a pearlescent glimmer, like the Scotch pearls that would be strung around my neck come our wedding day. Right now, the pearls sat in their case, carefully packed in the small coffin Jamie had used to ship everything from home. I imagined that while Bree and I were here for our fittings, Roger and Jamie were probably at this moment prying the lid up. I only hoped he wouldn’t find them, for I wished to surprise him when he saw them around my neck once more. He knew I still had them after I told my tale during our layover, but I hadn’t told him I’d sent them along with his kilt and swords.

“Claire, I think you were off on ye’re measurements. I thought the lacing would pull a little tighter.”

“Are you trying to tell me I’m fat?” I alleged.

“Of course not dear, but…”

“Jamie’s been feeding her,” Brianna chipped in, “Stews and bannocks – and that tower of cake. He’s actually a very good cook.”

“Oh, now I really do envy you,” Ruth sighed dreamily.

“It looks OK, doesn’t it?” I asked, suddenly feeling alarmed that my fairytale wedding was a wardrobe malfunction away from becoming a viral video.

“Nothing’s about to fall out, if that’s what you mean. We’ll just readjust the lacing, loosen the back – bring the front together a bit more. You won’t be in it all that long anyway!”

My mouth dropped open. Bree was laughing – I hoped she’d still be in as good a mood after Fiona had finished with her today!

~~~~~

When Ruth had arrived at the manse to accompany Fiona, Claire and Brianna to the dress shop for their fittings, she had not come alone. Jem had come along with their three youngest children, twelve year old Roger Douglas (who they refer to as R.D. just to keep names straight), ten year old Noah Mhor, and the ‘baby’, one year old Sage.

“We brought the younger half of the kids,” Jem said as he passed Claire in the kitchen, the baby in his arms.

“R.D. and Noah wanted to see Jamie’s sword and dirk, and their grandda, in that order!”
Claire smiled, knowing Jamie would quickly turn into his inner twelve year old given the opportunity to show off his weapons in front of an audience.

“Have fun,” Claire offered, finishing her coffee.

“Good morning, Brianna,” Jem greeted as he passed the foot of the stairs with his entourage just as she was coming down.

“Hi,” she replied, waiting for the children to enter the next room before she came off the last step.

“They aren’t coming with us?” she asked, finger pointed over her shoulder as she entered the kitchen.

“No,” Claire simply told her. She exhaled in relief.

~~~~~

With the exact exhale of relief she’d released in Fiona’s kitchen, Brianna stepped out of the dressing room.

“Isn’t this a bit…form-fitting?” she uneasily asked, raising her shoulders trying to adjust how close the long coat fitted.

“Nonsense, it shows off your assets without putting them on too much display,” Fiona informed her. “You have classical proportions, my dear. It’s nothing to hide.”

Bree smiled shyly and blushed. With darts under the bust, and nips and tucks to bring the waist in, the emerald green coat showed off Brianna’s hourglass figure, accentuating her ample breasts. It was clear she wasn’t completely comfortable, but as she moved around in the outfit, I could see her starting to feel confident about her own body. Her shoulders shifted back, and she stood tall.

“I guess it’s alright. The fabric feels nice – soft and familiar, almost comforting in a way, like I could snuggle in it.”

“It used to be the dress coat Wake wore with his kilt, but he outgrew it in the chest and back once he left for University. He was rather…narrow before he matured. All I really needed to do was make allowances for Brianna’s womanly curves.”

Bree ran her hand down the row of little black buttons and spun around, flaring the bottom out, exposing the cocoa-tan of the lining, almost the matte version of my pewter shoes. Bree was wearing leggings that almost matched that lining, but I could see that both Fiona and Ruth had focused in on that.

“You brought the black leggings, too?” Fiona asked.

Bree nodded.
“I think it might look better with those.”

All Brianna need do was hold the black leggings up in front of herself before they were convinced. I saw the dual nodding of their heads.

“Yes,” Ruth emphatically cried.

“Och, just the touch,” Fiona crowed.

The ‘crate’ was balanced along the console table that sat behind the couch in the study. Roger had thrown a blanket over the table, knowing he would catch hell if they scratched the finish on it. Jem came back from the garage with a crowbar, looking like a potential cinematic serial killer, handsome, but dangerous.

“I’ve got it,” he announced, waving off any assistance as he approached the coffin.

“It’ll be a pleasure to…do the opposite of what I usually get to do with one of these, and that it is filled with joyous possibilities.”

Jem exerted considerable force and got the lid loosened with three wrenching strokes. Jamie saw the two expectant faces of Jem’s boys peering cautiously into the container, and he smirked.

He drew the sword from its scabbard slowly and held it aloft as two young voices, and two older voices, said, “whoa”, rightly impressed.
Jamie brought the sword down letting the boys each have a chance to try to hold it up.

“It’s a real Scottish blade,” Jamie said as warning, “a might heavy for you boys yet.”

“May I?” Roger asked, reaching out to take a grip of it. Jamie turned it, supporting the blade as he handed it off to Roger’s hand.

“Ohh…she’s a beauty,” the historian admired.

“I’d like to get some time alone with this – maybe make a rubbing – get some samples for analysis,” he expressed toward Jamie.

“While Claire and I are on our honeymoon, I’ll let you look after the sword and the dirk,” Jamie said with a smile, clamping a hand on Roger’s shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

“There’s a dirk, too?” R.D. asked, getting on his tip-toes to look into the coffin once more. He was tall enough to see without the few added inches, but he liked feeling taller compared to the oak trees of men he was standing amid.

After happily giving Jem’s boys a chance to look at, and even handle the dirk a bit, he took it back, gave it one spin in his palm and put it away, having to collect his sword much the same, as Roger did not wish to relinquish it.

“You’ll get it back,” Jamie assured him, carefully placing the items in the coffin.

Jamie removed the bundle that was his kilt, and the shirt and jacket, so he could hang those items and let the wrinkles straighten out.

“Fiona would iron those for you,” Roger volunteered.

“Nah, they’ll be fine in a few days,” Jamie countered.

“What color would ye call that coat?” Jem asked, “I thought it was black at first, but…”

“Aubergine,” Jamie answered with a French lilt, and a hint of a bow in his posture.

“Quite handsome,” Roger commented.

“You will look grand, as I’m sure Claire will in the dress Fiona had made for her – but I am sworn to secrecy about the dress,” Roger happily warned.

“So, that’s the promise kept to the boys,” Jem averred, “But they each have full afternoons scheduled, so we’ll be off as soon as I collect the wee one. Jamie, I’ll see you and Claire Monday to introduce you to Father McBride.

He’s anxious to meet you after what I’ve told him.”

And then it was just Roger and Jamie at the manse.

“What has Jem told the priest?” Jamie inquired, a bit apprehensively, as they both sat on the couch, Jamie tapping his fingers sequentially on his thigh.
“Nothing to betray your confidence, but knowing the man, I’m sure you could tell him the whole truth and he’d not even bat and eye – pardon the term, but he’s rather unorthodox. I think you’ll like the man, as will Claire.

She told me more than once about confessing her experiences, thinking the priest would think her crazy, but finding unexpected acceptance. And if, once more, ye pardon my terminology, he’s cut from that kind of cloth

–and you know he’s got the humor after that joke Jem attributed to him. Jamie nodded slowly, thinking about Roger’s words, wondering if he should consider a full confession.

“So, that went quicker than I thought,” Roger mused aloud, after a peek at his watch, knowing Fiona and company would not be back for some time.

“Aye,” Jamie replied with a nod.

“Perhaps we could make ourselves useful and get the dinner started – Fiona’s not here, so we’ll not be stepping on her toes.”

“Ahh,” Roger hesitated.

“I will take full responsibility,” Jamie avowed. “She’s done so much to make this wedding happen, letting her have a night off duty – come home to a meal cooked for her - is the least I can do. And as you said, things went quicker than anticipated. I’ll go to the market.”

Roger was paralyzed at the very thought of someone cooking in Fiona’s kitchen, and Jamie was zipped into his leather jacket and on his way out before Roger could stop him.

~~~~~

Roger wrung his hands the whole time Jamie was gone, pacing between the front door and the study and back again.

“This is not a good idea,” he kept repeating to himself, shaking his head.

He turned on his heel the moment Jamie returned and settled several paper bags on the counter.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, nervously swallowing. Jamie just smiled and tilted his head.

“Och, in for a penny, in for a pound, aye?” Roger concluded. “What can I do to help?”

~~~~~

After making the needed adjustments to my wedding gown, and getting Brianna to take off the coat once she found it to her liking, Bree, Fiona, Ruth, and I headed to Fee’s favorite pub and coffee house.
“I thought we could use a drink before we headed home,” Fiona elucidated.

“Three whiskies and a coffee,” she ordered before all of us had cleared the doorframe.

Our glasses were delivered promptly, three chilled, one piping hot. We all took small sips, Bree after a cooling puff of breath.

“Too hot,” Brianna gulped, sticking her tongue out to cool it.

I looked down and smiled. Brianna was often impatient when it came to hot beverages, but she was never deterred, and always launched right in the next time.

We quietly imbibed as the sky outside dimmed.

“I need to get dinner started,” Fiona finally announced, “but at least we got a good bit of business done today.

“I’ll take care of the tab,” Ruth offered, and Fiona put her hand over mine before I could dig in my pocket to chip in, shaking her head.

“Our treat.”

~-----

“So you spent some time in New Orleans?” Roger asked as he acted as Jamie’s sous chef, and minded a large pot of rice.

“Aye, a few years,” he said with a sigh and a nod, leading Roger to believe something significant happened in that time. Something that still pained Jamie to recall.

“So this would be…Creole cooking?”

“My own hybrid of Creole and Cajun – a little bit city and a little bit country. I couldna get the file’, nor the okra just now, so it’s likely to taste different than what I usually make, and you canna officially call it a gumbo, but

it’ll be close enough,” Jamie assured him.

“It sure is starting to smell good – It’ll make a fine last supper!” Roger said with an impish smile.

“Fiona will not kill ye…she might ravage you to death, but you’ll die a happy man!”

“I take it you’ve been making food like this for Claire, then?”

“Considering the calories we’ve burned since I found her again, I had to keep her stamina up somehow!”

“Och, you are Claire’s equal in so many ways,” Roger claimed. “It is truly a miracle…fate may beat the hell outta you first, but if you survive the ride, the reward is worth it. It must really be something to have seen all you

have, and then find the wife you were always meant to have and meet the child…”
Roger could see Jamie was becoming emotional and stopped speaking.

“I’m sorry if I…”

“Nah…” Jamie shook off.

“I know how lucky I am. These have been the best few months of my life, outside of meeting and marrying Claire the first time. And here I am, on the verge of having…everything I’ve waited for…and I find myself…scared.

Whenever it seems things are going really right for me, disaster lurks around the corner…time and time again. I just hope I’ve broken that cycle, and that…finding Claire again means… all those years in between were a necessary interlude before we could pick up and live our lives.”

It was sobering fodder for thought, but Roger had the counterpoint to Jamie’s fears.

“I know I havna survived anything like what you’ve been through, and that’s just including what I do know, but I have felt like you do right now – that for each moment of joy you achieve, you must pay a toll of sorrow…but that’s the problem with true joy – there’s nowhere to go but down. But if you can land on your feet, you can push off again.”

Footsteps in the foyer brought their conversation to an end.

“What on earth has been going on in my kitchen?” Fiona ranted.

Wisely not depending on words to defuse Fiona’s anger, Jamie grabbed a spoon and scooped up a bit of the vegetables and sauce that were simmering away, shielding below it with his hand and blowing lightly on it until he poured it into Fiona’s mouth. Her eyes opened wide. She took the spoon from Jamie and went in for a second taste. After that second taste, she abruptly put the spoon down and turned to face Jamie. She looked on the verge of tears as she grabbed Jamie tightly around the middle.

“You have permission to use my kitchen whenever and for whatever you wish.”

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Roger whispered.

Claire proudly beamed, knowing Jamie had indeed achieved a rare deed – free reign in Fiona’s kitchen.

~~~~~

We settled in around the table and watched as Jamie finished off his okra-less gumbo with the addition of several pounds of the smallest shrimp he could find.

“They doona have the personality of crawfish, but they cook almost as soon as they hit the heat,”
Jamie instructed us as he looked over his shoulder.

Roger lined each of our bowls with a thick layer of fluffy rice and Jamie added just the right amount of shrimp and sauce. You could taste the onions, celery, and bell pepper mixed perfectly and spiced with garlic, paprika, parsley, and thyme, with a hint of heat that brought tears to my eyes. Fiona’s face turned bright red as she ate, but you couldn’t have pried the spoon from her hand if you’d tried. This was the first time Jamie had made this meal for me, but I was sure it would not be the last. We inhaled the food to the last grain of rice, and then leaned back in our chairs, cradling our bellies. I didn’t dare say it, but it was better than anything Fiona had made for us thus far. Even I was impressed with what Jamie had done to feed us tonight, and he had endeared himself to Fiona – something that would continue to serve him well, I was willing to bet. While Roger, Fiona, and

Brianna reveled in their full stomachs, Jamie leaned in.

“May I have your ear a moment…alone?”

I nodded and took his proffered hand.

“We’ll be in the study,” Jamie said, “Give us a few minutes?”

We got nods all around, and slipped slowly into the study. I gave the coffin a glance as I passed it, wondering if I could sneak the pearls out without getting caught. Jamie sat at the edge of the cushion, and I knew we were not in the study for a leisurely lounge after dinner.

“Roger said the priest, Father McBride, is a very open-minded sort. And I have been thinking…”

“You want to tell him everything, don’t you?”

“Aye,” he clipped, nodding and looking down.

His hands were folded together and I molded my hands on top of his.

“Why don’t we see how we feel when we meet him? I’m sure Roger’s right, but…”

“But…the threat of the pyre still clings to you,” Jamie put bluntly.

“Well…I doubt we would be burned at the stake in this century, but he could refuse to marry us.”

“Alright…but if we feel comfortable with the man…I’d like him to know everything – and that’s likely to include even some things I have yet to tell you.”

“I know you had lifetimes without me, Jamie. I won’t be hurt to hear about them.”

With the business out of the way, Jamie sat back and pulled me across his lap. I leaned back and looked up into Jamie’s face. The look there reminded me of the way he looked at me in the first few weeks after we’d first had sex – a sense of contentment that I was his, mixed with an eagerness to learn more and please
me. At that time, the look often made me feel guilty, for Jamie wanted me with singular focus, and I was torn over letting

him fall in love with me when I didn’t see a future with him yet. How was I to know that my future would come so far into the future, and that he’d be here, still looking at me with such love.

“I love you,” I softly spoke.

His smile blossomed and he kissed me.

“Love you,” he returned.

~~~~~

It turns out Jamie and I did spent most of the evening lounging on the couch. And we were left alone far longer than the few minutes Jamie asked we be given. It was a temporary calm before the next storm – and I wondered just how many more storms we would face before we managed to get remarried. I wanted his ring on my finger; I needed him in my life. I had lived perfectly well without him for twenty years, but the thought of being without him one more day – I shuddered at the very thought.

Fiona had done the dishes and came in to sit with us for a bit. Turns out, Roger had taken to his den with a favorite book and Brianna had gone up to her room to spend some quality time with her laptop.

“Roger told Brianna before she went to her room, and I shall tell you now, you need not go to church tomorrow, but if you wish to go and hear Jem, Roger will be leaving promptly at eight thirty.”

“Thank-you, Fee, but we probably won’t go,” I responded.

“Och, I figured as much. Roger is quite used to being the only member of this household to be a regular church goer, but he always had a feeling for religion. I think Jem always sensed that in his Da, and it may have been a factor in his decision to go down that path professionally. Roger is quite involved with Jem’s flock – enjoys sharing what he knows.”

“I never saw Roger as a very religious sort,” I imparted.

“Oh, he has his religion, but it doesna stand in the way of a good joke, a good whisky, or a good shag!”

~~~~~
We had a good lie-in to start off Sunday, then had a lovely ‘brunch-ish’ meal when Roger got back from church.
Jem drove Jamie and me to our meeting with Father McBride. He presided over ceremonies in multiple churches, one of them being the ancient chapel we exchanged vows in those many years ago, but we met in his office this day, for convenience sake.

We entered the room behind Jem, and were caught unaware as he gripped Father McBride in a hug and loudly made his greeting.

“Cow Patty.”

“Jem-stoned,” he hooted in return.

Jamie and I looked at each other, a bit shocked, but bemused by their familiar monikers for each other.

“Jamie and Claire Fraser, this is Father Padhraig McBride,” Jem informed us.

“Did I hear you calling him ‘Cow Patty’?” I questioned.

“Oh, aye, and he called me ‘Jem-stoned’.

I tilted my head, trying to assess how those nicknames came to be. I could see Jem pinking up a bit, a wicked smirk fighting against his tightening lips.

“Let’s just say, I was…indisposed when we met – the indiscretions of youth,” Jem offered, “‘Cow Patty’ came along a might later.”

“Aye, it did,” Padhraig confirmed, “As you might have noticed, there’s a parcel of pasture land surrounding this church. Well, the day I arrived, I was gifted with three cows – by this joker here. He called them the trinity – the

nerve, aye?”

The look on Jamie’s face was priceless.

“But we’re here for other matters,” Father McBride said with a nod. “So, I understand you two wish to be re-married?”

“Yes,” I said, broadly beaming, reaching out to take Jamie’s hand, “Now that we’ve found each other again.”

“Aye,” Jamie agreed, turning quite red, and squirming like child who was afraid he was about to be chastised.

“I understand you two have a child together?”

“Brianna, she’s twenty,” I offered.
The father nodded, but I noticed him glance at Jamie and then raise an eyebrow at Jem.

“Jem mentioned there were some…extenuating circumstances surrounding your separation…”

I rolled my lips into my mouth and looked at Jamie. We’d spent some time on Sunday deciding what we were going to tell our would-be uniter – a version of the truth, or the whole truth, and it was that time – a decision was

in the offing. I think Father McBride could feel our apprehension.

“I won’t bite,” he tried to make light.

“Do you hear group confessions?” I asked, knowing both Jamie and I had much to unburden from ourselves.

“Well, I know how to deliver a Mass, so I don’t see why I can’t accept confessions en masse.”

Jem, Jamie and I all groaned, and I rolled my eyes.

“And yes, I do confess all my bad jokes,” Father McBride admitted.

“Of course you do. It lets ye tell it to one more person,” Jem charged, making Padhraig tilt his head and pull an imaginary fedora brim.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Jem offered, making his way back out the way he had come in. “I’ll be visiting with the cows.”

“Jem, you don’t have to leave. I know we can trust you – you’ve had plenty of chances to divulge our secrets and haven’t, and I know your parents told you everything I told them,” I acknowledged.

Jem flicked his eyes up in Father McBride’s direction.

“I’m OK with it,” Padhraig stated, “And under the seal of the confession I am obliged to tell no one, and frankly, I’m curious as hell after the cryptic references Jem’s been tossing about – hypotheticals that could confound the Sphinx himself!”

I barely contained an eruption of laughter. I turned to Jamie and nodded my approval. I know we didn’t have time for every detail of Jamie’s nearly three hundred years, but I’m sure Jamie knew what it was he wanted to tell.

~~~~~

“Bless me father, for I have sinned…against nature…I have lived an unnaturally long life,” Jamie began as he crossed himself.

“I was born in the year seventeen-hundred twenty-one.”

Jamie stopped to ascertain the father’s initial reaction. I saw our confessor jot down something, pay attention to it for a moment, and come up nodding his head as he let out a breath.
“I conspired with my uncle’s plans to make Claire my bride the first time because I loved her, without regard for her feelings.”

I reached my hand out to Jamie, letting him know with a touch I held no ill will for that choice.

“Perhaps at this time I should say we were first married in the year seventeen forty-three, in the very church we hope you will marry us in next week, and I grew to love him very much,” I calmly revealed, “despite the fact

that I was already married to another man when I wed Jamie – though I was absolved of that by Father Anselm at the abbey we took refuge in.”

The father titled his head as if to say, ‘we’ll have to address that’.

“We had two and a half years, filled with ups and downs, including the loss of our first child…” Jamie gulped.

“Faith,” I barely vocalized.

“Aye,” he confirmed, squeezing my hand.

“And when we were blessed with another child, it was the eve of the battle of Culloden, and I abandoned both of them, forcing Claire to go back where she’d come from as I joined the battle, thinking my death

imminent…and it was. I died at Culloden, only to find myself reborn for the first of many times. In the years since, I have wed three more times, only once in a proper Catholic rite.”

He told the priest about his time with Laoghaire, how she caused one of his deaths, and how he’d taken her daughters so they could live the lives they wanted and needed to live. He recounted the events of several lifetimes

and their affiliated deaths. He told how it was nearly a century after his marriage to Laoghaire that he had the will to wed again.

“That’s not to say I remained celibate for so long, but marriage felt unwise after what had transpired. She left me with no desire to cleave to anyone but Claire, but I didna know when or if she would reenter my life, so I kept

my…dalliances…amorphous for that span. I wasna looking to find someone to live a life with, but someone found me…someone who needed my help and protection…”

“My second era in the Americas I had decided to venture forth from the east coast. Gold had been discovered in California, so there were regular expeditions heading west, and I found myself employed to secure a group

traveling that way. We made it to the banks of the Mississippi river – Illinois. The next day we would traverse the river and make for St. Louis. I woke face down in the river…naked – reborn yet again, not knowing the how or

the why of that death. I was pulled from the river by an industrious young man who worked on one of the riverboats – at the time he went by…Sam – Samuel Clemens,” he said turning toward me.

I looked at Jamie with an incredulous stare, but knowing he would not lie about such a thing.
“By the time we reached New Orleans, I had acquired clothing, jewelry, and a good sum of cash by means of gambling. I also came into possession of something completely unexpected due to one man betting more than he had. To settle our debt, a young girl of color, no more than twelve, but looking far younger, arrived at the bar I’d chosen to sup at. She handed me a folded note and several sheaves of paper. I opened the note and read the words ‘She’s yours – debt paid in full.’ The man had…settled up with a slave. I tried for several days to track where she actually belonged, but she fell ill, and I chose to care for her rather than look for someone to foist her off on.”

“I found the nearest apothecary, thinking the girl might be afflicted with malaria. The herbalist there was a strong willed, outspoken woman of African and Native American heritage, and she determined it was something else, and also gave me an earful about ownership of another living person and the self-righteousness of ‘people like me’. She took the girl in hand and set her up with a bed upstairs, telling me I could come back in a few days to pick her up, but I refused to leave the girl’s side. Mira, the herbalist, thought I was unwilling to leave because she thought I was protecting my property, but in reality, I couldn’t imagine leaving the girl alone among strangers. I was enough of one as it was. I slept on the floor by her bed so I could check on her through the night. Mira warned me she kept a loaded gun within reach should I have any ideas about visiting her during the night.”

“The girl’s fever spiked the first night, and in her fever dreams she spoke in French, so I tried to comfort her by speaking it to her. Mira came to check on her while I was holding a cold cloth to her head and mumbling in French about her strength, and how whatever had happened to her in the past, her life with me would be different. Mira started seeing me in a different light, and I found myself…feeling…falling in love,” Jamie struggled to say.

I think he was afraid it would hurt me to hear he had allowed himself to love another, but I was heartened by it knowing what Laoghaire had put him through. He looked at me, tears starting to wet his eyes.

“The girl, Delphine, was better in no time, and she had taken to both of us, as we had taken to each other. Mira and I found a willing man of God, and the three of us became a family.”

“For those years, it was as if you were back in my life, Claire, even if it was a visitation in a different guise. Her knowledge of herbs, her ability as a healer…she had your spirit and humor – and propensity to get in trouble,” he added, the slightest smirk and hint of pink on his cheeks.
I felt as if he was holding something back, something I’m sure he would tell me if we were alone, but it was left unsaid just now. Jamie’s smirk retreated and he looked down, closing his eyes and pursing his lips as if trying to keep his jaw from chattering.

“She died a few years later. It was the longest I’d stayed in one place since my sister Jenny died.”

Those words stung his lips as they escaped.

“I finished my journey west, arriving in California as many Chinese workers were employed to complete the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, and being fluent in several Chinese dialects, I was hired by the railroad at first just to translate, and mediate disputes, but I enjoyed the physical labor. Working to exhaustion has always helped to purge my mind, and the other workers respected me more for being willing to pitch in and get my hands dirty. It was steady work for many years, and even after the construction was completed, I stayed with the rail company. I became a station master near San Francisco.”

Jamie went on to tell Father McBride about his next wife – an acrobat with a Chinese circus troupe. He was on hand when the circus train rolled through, and impressed the lithe woman by being able to speak to her in perfect Mandarin.

“She was a bitty thing, not even as high as my shoulder, but not one who would take no as an answer. Her name, Qiao Xiao-Niao, meant ‘wondrous small bird’ – she could move like a hummingbird – hover and seemingly defy gravity. It was a wonder. She set her sights on me despite the objections of her entire family. I did all I could to discourage her attentions. After losing Mira…but time does heal, and she was relentless.”

Jamie recounted their sudden elopement, and almost being beaten to death by the girl’s father and brothers when they caught them consummating their marriage, only to be rescued by his new bride.

“It was an adventurous six months…” Jamie trailed off and exhaled heavily.

“Did you lose her?” I asked, seeing a pattern emerging.

“Och, no, not in that way…she survived, but…she took a bad fall. She had told me only hours before she was having my child. She lost the baby, and her family kept me from her during her convalescence. I never spent another minute with her…not even to say goodbye…I gave up on marriage then and there. I had ruined too many lives.”

“My son, none of these tragedies is your fault. I can see you are a man of deep compassion, who goes whole-heartedly into places others fear to tread,” Padhraig tried to comfort Jamie. “And you have come to be wed again, hopefully for good this time. With both of you being so long lived…”
Jamie and I looked at each other, agape.

“No – that’s not right,” Jamie blurted.

“What Jamie is trying to say is I just turned fifty, about a month ago. When Jamie said he sent me back to where I’d come from…I met Jamie when I fell through time. I traveled back from nineteen forty-five to seventeen forty-three. I wanted nothing more than to return to my husband, but circumstances required I marry Jamie to keep me safe, and I discovered in him a love unlike anything I had felt before. When he sent me back, I was

supposed to travel to nineteen forty-eight, but for some reason I landed in nineteen ninety-five. I was only without Jamie for twenty years, but he was without me for more than two and a half centuries. I’m amazed, after

hearing some of his life events for the first time that he can still love me with such passion after his heart has endured so much.”

Father McBride was widely shaking his head.

“Oh, wow, Jem was not exaggerating the incredible nature, the extenuating circumstances, oh, God. For you two to find each other again – the miracle of miracles…”

“Father, I have killed, in and out of battle, fathered children out of wedlock, defied death while those I loved succumbed…I have collected a mountain of sins…is it a miracle or a curse?”

“Most of what you confessed here was not true sin. You have a true heart and a strong mind, else you’d not have such guilt over living so many good lives. I absolve thee of all sins, real or perceived.”

Jamie nodded, almost begrudgingly accepting his absolution.

“We’ve delved into all the marriages of the past, so perhaps we should address the one to come? Neither of you have a currently living spouse, no matter who performed what kind of ceremony?”

“That’s correct,” I offered, seeing that Jamie still looked a little overwhelmed and shaky.

“No one is going to jump up in the middle of the ceremony with a legitimate reason to stop the marriage from taking place?”

“No,” I continued to answer.

We left Father McBride’s office with everything we needed to make our union official, yet again, in place, and it was a relief. I also felt I understood Jamie even more-so after hearing of his other marriages and some of the lives he lived in the years we were apart.

As we left, two of the three cows that comprised ‘the trinity’ came up to the fence along the walkway. I had taken a more leisurely pace with Padhraig, using the time to explain more fully how I had come to find myself married to two men for a time. When we caught up to Jem and Jamie, each one was lavishing attention on a ginger-colored Scottish bovine – and they were lapping up the interest being shown
to them.

“The third one’s a bit skittish,” Father McBride told me, trying to lure the one ‘silver’ cow over to meet us.

“We call her ‘Holy Ghost’ because of her coloring,” he said as she finally came over.

“Hello there,” I warmly toned, putting my hand out to her. She didn’t shy from me so I rubbed her nose.

“She likes you,” Padhraig happily remarked.

“What are the other’s names?” I asked.

“Well, there’s some debate on that – since they’re the trinity, the other two should be Father and Son, but I didna think the lasses would take to being called such things! I call them Ginger and Cookie.”

I laughed. The interaction with the cows seemed to put Jamie in a calmer mind-set. Therapy cows – who would have thought it – but why not? All manner of other animals had proven to give comfort, why not a shaggy-topped cow?

Jamie turned and looked at me with a big smile on his face.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” he asked me.

“Beautiful,” I agreed.

Jamie kissed me on the forehead and turned back because the cow he had been paying attention to nudged him in the back, vying for his time once more.

“Is it alright if we go to the old chapel, take a look around?” I asked as the Father and I continued to take some time with Holy Ghost.

“I don’t see why not – I actually made a rather generous window around your appointment, lest something leave me too overwhelmed to go on with my day,” he whispered as an aside.

I smiled and lowered my head.

“Jamie, would you like to see ‘our’ chapel? It might be good to face all the ghosts there before we’re getting married.”

“As you wish,” Jamie said with a courtly nod.

~~~~~

It was late enough when we arrived home that we had missed Fiona’s lunch. Brianna was just finishing up helping Fee with washing the dishes, and the pair of them turned and gave me the same glare of disappointment.
“You were due back by lunch,” Fiona admonished.

“I know, Fiona. Things took a little longer – and then we went to look at the chapel…I needed to see it before I was going into it to get married.”

Fee looked down.

“Oh, well…I can see the logic – are ye hungry?”

“Actually, Jamie and I treated Jem and Father McBride to a pub lunch – I hope you don’t mind too much?”

“It was the polite thing to do.”

“I really am sorry – Oh, is that the time? Bree, we need to get our bags so we can get checked into our hotel in the next three hours – “

“No, we don’t – there was a mix-up with the reservations – just the ones for before the wedding, though, if that helps.”

“How could that happen?” I asked in astonishment.

“Computer glitch – their computer. It’s a good thing we have other options. I just got their oops-o-gram email today, and if I hadn’t checked my emails, we would have traipsed all the way over there before we knew.

They’ve promised a full refund, but it won’t show up right away. I double checked your honeymoon accommodations, and my room for after the wedding as well – those are fine, thank God. So it looks like we’ll be staying here with Fiona and Roger until the wedding now.”

Fiona looked suitably satisfied, almost smug, as if saying without a word that a higher power had seen fit to keep us within her realm until a time she wanted us to leave.

Brianna had ambled over to the table where I had left the marriage schedule – the vital piece of paper needed to accompany us to the wedding, and had to be signed by Jamie and me, and our two witnesses immediately after the wedding, and filed with the registrar no more than three days after our wedding or all the trouble we’d put ourselves through would be for nothing.

I watched my daughter eying the paperwork and then smirking. I approached her and wrapped an arm around her back.

“You doing OK?” I asked.

She nodded.

“I saw you smirking a moment ago – what passed through your mind? And don’t tell me ‘nothing’, I know that look – I know it on you, and I know it on your father,” I murmured in her ear.

“My mom and dad are getting married!” she gushed at me, “That thought, just the thought that I have a dad…I thought it had all hit me already, but to see your names on the paperwork…it’s real.”

I smiled and blushed, feeling my heart pound as I listened to my daughter’s emotional revelations.
Before her emotions could completely overwhelm her, Brianna slipped away. I heard her feet on the stairs as she sped off to her room.

“Did I miss something?” I asked Fiona.

“Well, a bit ago, some of the older granddaughters called and asked if Bree wanted to spend the afternoon with them. When I asked her…this…wall of apprehension overtook her. I think she wanted to go, but…”

“But…her fear of being touched got in the way…again…I hope they can understand. She’s not purposely being antisocial.”

“I know, dear, but it is a shame.”

I found myself brooding over Brianna’s inability to socialize. It hurt my heart.

~~~~~

Fiona was so happy about our staying with her until the wedding that she was practically floating two inches off the floor the whole time she was preparing dinner. I suppose it simplifies things some, but now the onus of making sure our belongings got where they were going fell on the day of our wedding. I suppose if the only thing that arrived at our suite after the wedding was Jamie and me, it wouldn’t matter much that first night. I doubt we’d need a change of clothes, or that anything else would be of consequence, but it put one more thing on the schedule for a day that was already going to be complex.

It didn’t even ruin Fee’s good mood when we told her the three of us were going to visit Andrew Rhys – Jones, leaving first thing in the morning, and not returning until Thursday, probably late. I’m not sure Brianna really wants to go with us on this side trip to Wales, but I want her with us.

~~~~~

Jamie put his head on my lap once we finally retired to our room at the manse. He sighed heavily, and I began running my fingers through his hair. He closed his eyes.

“Jamie?”

“Aye,” he breathed out, keeping his eyes shut, taking in and releasing another big breath.

“There’s more to the story about what happened with Mira and Delphine, isn’t there?”

“A bit more…shall I tell you?” he asked, opening his eyes and looking up at me.
I nodded.

“What was wrong with Delphine? You said it wasn’t Malaria?”

“That’s right, and that was the prompt for the first jaundiced eye Mira launched in my direction – I tried to tell her what I thought was wrong with the lass, but she gave the girl no more than a cursory glance before she

started to concoct her remedy – oil of cloves, black walnut, and wormwood. The shop smelled vaguely like the swirling smoke I had passed through a cloud of when we passed the local smoke shop – they must have been

using clove tobacco, for it had that pungent spiciness.”

“Let’s see…that would mean…ugh – intestinal worms – easily contracted if she spent any time barefoot around animals, or in a garden that fertilized with human waste.”

“Verra good, Sassenach.”

“I’ve kept up my herbal knowledge. I’ve always thought that once I no longer have hands steady enough for surgery, I would consider naturopathy and being an herbalist to continue to heal others in another way – go back to the time honored traditions.”

“Fine idea, Sassenach – you always did have a fine, gentle touch, thank God.”

I could tell by the look in his eyes that Jamie was remembering the first few weeks of knowing each other. I remembered vividly how he described what my hands felt like simply caring for his injuries, and how he craved me to touch him elsewhere.

“You said Mira reminded you of me…”

“Aye, I did, and thankfully she forgave me when I called her by your name. We both went into our marriage knowing each had had a great love before.”

“Why didn’t you have children together?”

“Och, well, it was not through lack of trying, I assure you, for that’s one more thing she had in common with you – desirous, at times wanton in her sexual appetites, and nearly as skilled as you. But, she was in her forties, and nothing came of it, save the pleasure. And we had a girl to raise – one who had been malnourished and mistreated – one who deserved the full attention of two parents.”

“Tell me about Delphine,” I encouraged.

Jamie’s eyes lit up the way they had when he first saw Brianna. Delphine was as much his child as any.

“She was something else! Smart and savvy – you’d never have known that Mira and I hadn’t made that child. She was equal parts Mira and me. She was newly married when Mira took ill. They were set to leave for France –
she married a French citizen – but she exerted her will and refused to go. And to his credit, that man supported my girl, understood how important Mira was in her life.”

“What happened to Mira? How did she die?”

“My best guess would be some form of cancer. She was able to stave off death with her herbal knowledge, but eventually she was overwhelmed by her symptoms. She died cradled in my arms, with Delphine holding her hands.”

Jamie saw the tears streaming down my cheeks and his memory-filled, serene, story-telling visage changed to a saddened, concern-laden expression as he reached up for my face to wipe away my tears. But as he tried to stop my tears, his own eyes were filling as he began to feel those events rather than just think them.

“I felt like I lost both of you that day – her for the first time, and you for the second.”

Finally, that deep, unspoken part of the story, the thing, other than sex, that kept Jamie from telling Father McBride every detail, was out in the open.

I kissed Jamie softly on the lips.

There really was nothing I could say, but I could convey my sympathy and empathy and love as we quietly shared our souls and our bodies.

It was cathartic for both of us.

~~~~~
Fee got up early to make sure we’d have breakfast on board before we caught our train for Wales in order to visit Griff’s father Andrew. It was a journey of over three hundred miles, so I knew it was not just a whim for Jamie. He felt obliged to make this visit, and with what little I knew of his relationship with Andrew, I understood. Certain people had been touchstones in Jamie’s life, confidants, keepers of his secrets, and Andrew Rhys-Jones, and his son Griffith, were two of those vitally important people.

Bree actually seemed relieved to be among strangers today, relatively sure no one on this train would attempt to hug her. She was tucked up tight to the window, watching the countryside speed past as we rattled along. She looked happy, but tired, as we had gotten up at an ungodly hour hoping to make it to Wales in time to sup with Andrew. There was something about the rhythmic movements of a train. Even if we hadn’t been fighting our eyelids, I’m relatively sure it would have lulled us to sleep, that’s Brianna and me. Jamie was wide awake, and unaffected by the gentle swaying, but he was a nice, warm seat mate, and guard dog for his sleeping girls.

Yesterday’s confessions seemed to have the opposite effect on us – Jamie had been lightened by the experience, set free of fear of hurting me because he loved another, I had become immeasurably tired. It had been a lot to take in, emotionally exhausting, knowing Jamie had suffered so much loss, and knowing he felt he’d lost me again.

~~~~~

“Who the hell is it?” greeted our ringing of the doorbell once we had arrived.

“You did tell him to expect us?” I asked my soon to be husband as we stood in the small covered portico.
“I did,” he answered.

“Perhaps it slipped his mind – Andrew, it’s me, Jamie Fraser…and two lovely ladies.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so quicker,” the man quipped as he drew open the door.

“Andrew,” Jamie greeted, leaning in for a hug, but getting rebuffed.

“You’ll be in need of another set of ID?” Andrew accused.

“Not this time,” Jamie replied, “But I thought you might like to finally meet Claire.”

“So this is her?” Andrew asked as he gave me a visual inspection. “Well, well, and who is this?” he said as he noticed Bree hanging back behind us.

“This is our daughter, Brianna,” Jamie proudly introduced.

She stepped forward and extended her hand, determined to take control of the situation, and not be left at the mercy of an unwanted hug. Andrew took her hand in both of his and gave it a reassuring squeeze, seeming to understand her boundaries instinctively.

“I always knew your father would make a very pretty girl, and now I have my proof,” he quipped as he leaned in a bit.

“And everybody always told me I made a better boy than a girl,” Brianna asserted, standing tall, and being ever so bold in her first words with this man.

“Oh, my dear, as acerbic as your father ever was. Will you take my arm, let me escort you to the dining room?”

Bree looked back at me, seeming to seek approval, looking nervous. I shrugged, letting my
daughter make her own choice.

“I’d rather not take your arm,” she answered matter-of-fact. “But I will accompany you.”

“Good for you. Most young ladies can be guilted into taking an old man’s arm…I’m glad you aren’t among them. I’d be disappointed if a child of Jamie’s were so easily swayed. Walk wi’ me. Just being in your presence makes me feel young – come along you two,” he called back at Jamie and me, happily walking shoulder to shoulder with Brianna.

~~~~~

Every foot along the walls was another displayed treasure, some dating back as far as Jamie. It felt like we were in some grand museum as we probed the depths of the house on our way to the dining room.

“I authenticated much of this,” Jamie softly informed me, noticing me casting glances side to side, “That’s how we became acquainted – struck up a conversation when I disputed the age and origin of - ”

“I hope you don’t mind pot luck,” Andrew announced, cutting Jamie off.

“Tell you about it later,” Jamie whispered in my ear, as if he thought our host was purposely silencing him.

“I have a lady who comes in once a week and stocks my refrigerator with groceries and my freezer with prepared meals, so I have something to fall back on should I not want to cook,” I heard Andrew telling Bree as we entered the dining room, “But this was a special occasion, so I did a bit of shopping for myself this week – so with luck, there’s something really good in that pot – ergo ‘pot luck’!” I could see Brianna smile at him by the outlines of her cheeks.

“Would you be willing to give me a hand getting everything to the table?”
Bree nodded.

“You two sit,” Andrew commanded of Jamie and me. “The kitchen is just through here.”

Bree soon returned carrying a large silver platter with what looked like an even larger piece of meat.

“What is it?” I asked, seeing only the brown crust and what looked like blackened onions on the top.

“Pork roast with potatoes and onions,” she dutifully reported.

“Yes, I was going to go ‘whole hog’ but this was more than big enough,” Andrew joked.

Jamie smiled at me across the corner of the table, clearly delighted to be in Andrew’s presence once more, looking like he was attempting to extract my approval of the man. I nodded subtly.

“So,” Andrew began as he took his seat at the head of the table, “You finally found them. Sometimes I wondered if the pair of you were simply figments of his imagination, but here you are, and I can tell by the smile on yon lad’s face he’s found his family – though he was convinced he’d sired a son!”

I saw Bree look down.

Jamie quickly jumped in with, “But I coulna be more proud of my daughter. She’s better than any son.”

“Little girls can wrap their fathers around their fingers,” Andrew offered.

“That she has,” Jamie warmly toned, the same blush on his cheeks for saying the words as there was on Brianna’s cheeks for hearing them.
The meal sped by, and in no time we were in Andrew’s library with after dinner coffees, sitting before the licking flames in the fireplace. Andrew had instructed Jamie how to build the perfect fire down to the placement of the last twig, and he had taken each correction in stride, knowing Andrew was trying to get under his skin, and not letting it happen.

Without provocation, Andrew began musing about how his relationship with Jamie began. I was quite curious to hear his tale, hoping it might also reveal some details about Griff, and why they were all so close.

“I first met your father in the waning months of World War II…so many treasures had been looted, and in many cases the provenance had been lost, the owners disappeared from the annals of time itself. Word of mouth had it that there was a man who could identify all manner of antiquities on sight, and could quote the historical derivations by rote,” Andrew started telling Brianna.

“You were in the war?” Bree said, turning her head to look at Jamie.

“Och, Aye…I did my national service two times over. I applied to be part of the tank corps based on some of the stories your mam told me, but I…was too big.”

“You hadn’t told me that,” I chimed in with, “I guess I thought you’d find a way to avoid going into battle again after all you’d been through.”

“I tried, but…it couldn’t be avoided. I found myself conscripted both times.”

“It was…quite difficult to avoid military service, and greatly frowned on if you were a capable man…I remember all too well…” I trailed off.

“Mom?” Bree questioned, “You…”

“I was a nurse in the war. It was before I went back…before I met Jamie.”
Bree looked a bit forlorn, haunted by more she never knew of me, but there had been no reason to talk to her about those years. Some of her contemporaries had parents who had been in the military, but my experiences would not have aligned with what they knew, and it would have thrown up more questions, and made Brianna’s version suspect, seem untruthful, as it was virtually impossible for someone born in nineteen ninety-five to have a parent who participated in World War II.

“Children rarely have the full picture of what their parents experienced in life before they came along, and with you two as her parents, this young lady hasn’t a chance!” Andrew deduced, “But I digress – I was telling you about your father, and how we met…Like I was saying, his reputation gave me cause to look him up. He came well recommended, and I saw first-hand as he authenticated a room full of armaments. It was impressive, so…I dug into who this man was – for you must trust the man to trust his word!” Andrew emphasized with a wagging pointer finger.

“That’s when he found me out,” Jamie volunteered.

“Quite,” Andrew confirmed.

I smiled and glanced at Jamie.

“Found him out?” I inquired.

“Aye,” Jamie breathed out, clearly remembering.

“His military record was rather impressive – right down to the posthumous medal for bravery!” Andrew said at a measured pace, to make every word understood.

“Oops!” Brianna interjected spritely.

Jamie smirked and nodded toward Bree.
“I accused him of desertion – demanded to see his papers, prove who he was or I was going to turn him in. I still had connections with the military and the government. That’s how I got my hands on his military records in the first place…And then he told me this impossible tale of having fought not only in both world wars, but having been on the fringes of the American Revolution, and even having fought at the Battle of Culloden. And of course he had no papers to produce, having lost anything that was on his person.”

“Why didn’t you just give him a fake name?” I asked, knowing Jamie had lived under many aliases over the years.

“I did, at first – what was it…Mal Mack, I think I introduced myself as to him, but somehow the truth came out. Andrew was the only person to want to authenticate me! I could tell he was skeptical of my life story.”

“I was that, but I just couldn’t reconcile a man with his military record suddenly deserting. It made no sense, for on paper he was such an honorable man, well spoken of…respected by every commanding officer he’d ever served. I had run across many men who looked good on paper but were unscrupulous, and Jamie had that personable way about him, but he had a depth and a grounding sadness – which I am glad to see is all but gone from your eyes now that you have this woman and your child back in your life…But after hearing what he had to tell me, I figured he was either out of his mind, or telling me the truth, and he seemed quite sane, so I believed him, and helped him get the paperwork he needed to no longer be a ghost.”

“Aye, and he did it again after my next death.”

“So that’s why he asked if you needed new papers,” I calmly spoke, and then took a sip from my cup.

“He knew all the right people, and what he couldn’t get through channels, he created himself.”

“I was an engraver by trade, at least before the war, so a birth certificate posed no real challenge, especially in an age when few, if any, had babies in hospital, and handwritten doctor’s notes were...
proof enough of a child’s existence.”

“And after the war?” I inquired.

“Diplomat, ambassador, emissary –whatever you want to title it – government speak for bullshit artist! But I had the skills for it, and no entanglements at the time. Once I was married and Griff came along, it became difficult, and once she died… Well, thank God Jamie was available and willing to help a hapless father out! But I do find it funny, with all the influence you exerted over Griff in his formative years, knowing how much you wanted your wife and child in your life, that Griff would turn out to be the perpetual bachelor.”

Jamie and I looked at each other, wondering if Andrew knew about Griff’s quite long term relationship with Sidney.

“Yes, I know, but they aren’t married,” Andrew quickly came up with as a response to our unasked question.

Jamie’s once sided smiled adorned his face.

“Not yet,” he said to Andrew, walking past him and giving him a pat on the shoulder, making the move to trade in his coffee for something stronger from the decanter next to Andrew’s chair, “But her touch is all over his house, and her tastes remind me of my sister Jenny, and Sidney happens to be descended from her line.”

“Is that whose house you’ve been staying in?” Brianna asked.

“Aye, it is. Griff needed someone to take care of the place while he was on a book tour…”

“And it is already housing half your treasures,” Andrew interrupted.
“But I noted most of the casks didna make the journey!” Jamie accused teasingly.

Andrew chuckled at first, but then stopped and suddenly said, “MOST? Why that…you mean to tell me he got some of that whisky all the way to Boston?”

“I can attest to that,” I confirmed, “and I’m still recovering from it.”

I saw Brianna smirk as she raised her cup to take a drink. I was glad she seemed to be enjoying the stories and banter.

“Oh, speaking of the whisky, I promised a cask to Roger MacKenzie and his family for all the help with the wedding, and for making sure Claire and Brianna were here to be found. If I leave you the address, and the money to cover the shipping, could you have it shipped to them?”

“I hate to part with even one of those barrels of nirvana, but they are yours to do with as you wish, and if you are willing to part with a cask of such aged whisky, you must owe a true debt.”

“There might not have been a Claire or Brianna to find if not for certain members of that family. A cask of whisky is the least I owe them.”

There was a bit of a lull, so I opted to ask a question that would hopefully redirect the conversation in a direction that might salve my curiosity.

“You mentioned Jamie helped you out with Griff after your wife…passed?” I found myself asking.

“Oh, I tried to do the single father bit, but I was torn up, throwing myself into work, until Griff started getting himself into trouble. The day, at age eleven, he got returned to me in restraints for trying to walk through a check point heading into East Germany, I knew I needed someone to keep an eye on him, and Jamie seemed the perfect choice. He could give the boy a classical education, as well as a practical one,” Andrew voiced.

“Considering some of the more menial jobs I had over the years, being a minder, a teacher, if I
dare say, a mentor, was a good many steps up from grave digger. It’s never easy, though, to start a new life ev’ry few years or so, when all you want to do is go back to a life you’ve had and know you canna have again…But having a hand in raising a child – I’ve never found a more fulfilling vocation.”

Jamie looked wistful and a bit misty-eyed, and I saw him look almost longingly at Brianna. Tonight, I thought, I should tell him that while Bree was an adult in many ways, there was plenty of parenting left to do.

“So, did you teach Griff Latin and Greek and such?” I teased Jamie, remembering some of what he told me about his education at the hands of a tutor.

“Aye, and he taught me about the Beatles and Rolling Stones, and the virtues of long hair and non-conformists. He took it pretty hard when I informed him hair length and politics often traded sides.”

Andrew just nodded.

“Well, I suppose I ought to let you get settled for the night…and young lady – if you let him be half the dad to you that he was to my boy, you’ll have more dad than you know what to do with – I promise.”

“I know,” she said with a smile.

“I know,” she repeated, shyly catching Jamie’s eyes for a moment and then looking away and biting her bottom lip.

~~~~~

Bree lingered in our room after she changed for bed. It took her a while to find the courage, but she finally said what was bothering her.

“I’m…sorry if I seemed rude to your friend,” she nervously voiced toward Jamie.
He sat up from his reposing position and sat on the corner of the bed.

“What’s that, lass?”

“I know I was…” Bree was wringing her hands.

“He didna mind, so why would I?” Jamie warmly toned, reaching his hands out to take hers.

I was glad to know that no longer gave her pause. She readily reached out her hands in reply, letting Jamie have that contact he craved so much from her. I came and sat next to him at the foot of the bed, leaning my head on his shoulder.

“I think Andrew liked how you were with him,” I reassured my daughter, “But I’m curious, Bree, why is it you could talk to a complete stranger with such confidence and surety, when seeing Roger and Fiona again left you reeling?”

She pressed her lips tightly shut and rolled them into her mouth as she formed her thoughts to answer me.

“It’s like…I’m not sure how to explain it – there were no expectations here.”

“No expectations?” I questioned.

“Yeah…I love Roger and Fiona, they’re great, but they expect me to act a certain way because they’ve known me since I was little, but I’m not like who I was the last time we were here. SO much has changed for me, but I feel bad about not being who they want me to be. I guess sometimes it’s easier being myself around people who don’t know me at all. I’m not afraid of disappointing them. Does that make sense?”

“Actually, it does, sweetie. It’s part of trying to please everyone.”
“Is that a female affliction, then?” Jamie asked, “For I know very few men who worry about pleasing everybody.”

“Men don’t have to worry about pleasing everybody, Jamie, but unfortunately it’s still expected of women, along with everything else. A man who doesn’t try to please everyone is serious, professional, all business, meanwhile, a woman who acts the same way is difficult, frigid, or just plain a bitch.”

Jamie had been looking at me while I spoke, but turned back to catch Brianna’s reaction. She slowly nodded her head at Jamie.

“It can be like that, especially if you choose a line of work traditionally associated with men,” Bree informed him. “Not that I would have chosen another field just to get along more easily, but I have run into so many assumptions – It was over a year into my curriculum classes before some of the guys in my major stopped asking who I was there to visit, rather than acknowledging I belonged there as much, if not more, than they did, and then they got angry when I did better in class. But I didn’t feel any expectations because I didn’t know any of them. I could be who I wanted to be, not what I thought anyone expected me to be.”

“I hope you doona feel that I have expectations of ye,” Jamie made known to Bree.

“Other than thinking I’d be a boy?” she asked.

“Och, I put that thought aside the moment I knew you were you – and I meant what I said earlier tonight – you are better than any son. You are bright and capable, and I’m proud you are so strong. And I hope you can learn to be yourself even in the face of people who’ve known you since you felt like someone else.”

“Thank-you. That means a lot to me,” Brianna tearfully replied.

Jamie squeezed her hands.
“You should probably get some sleep now. If I know Andrew, he’ll want us up early, and he’ll want to bend your ear all day. I think he’s been waiting a long time to tell his tales about me.”

Jamie handed Bree off to my hands and I stood and pulled her into my arms, our necks locking around each other.

“Hug him for me,” she whispered ever so softly in my ear. I nodded against her shoulder.

When she pulled back from our embrace, she flashed a smile at Jamie, nodded quickly, and made her escape for the night.

“Come here,” I said to Jamie, taking him into my embrace.

“This hug is from Bree,” I relayed, wrapping my arms around his shoulders. “She asked me to do this. Your daughter still needs her dad.”

His smile doubled the light in the room.

~~~~~

Jamie and I heard voices in the kitchen when we came down for the day. We were both pleasantly surprised to find Brianna was already up listening to the continuing stories of Andrew Rhys-Jones as the pair of them made their breakfasts.

“Ah, finally, Jamie, Claire, grab yourselves something to eat, I’ve been regaling your daughter with tales from the eighties, when you moved back in with us for a bit after that last death of yours…it is still the last death of yours?” he added, making sure of his information about Jamie.

“Aye…I’ve managed to keep myself alive this time – though there were some close scrapes,” Jamie joked.
Those words sent a chill down my spine, but only Bree saw my shoulders tighten as it happened. I smiled reassuringly at her, and I think she understood. Jamie making light of death did frighten me, but he needed to look

at that way for his peace of mind. I wondered how I would react if it had been me - would I have been overwhelmed? I knew Jamie was acutely aware of how short a life can be, having outlived so many, but he knew that

long before I ever met him, losing his mother and brothers, and then his father at young ages. He was still quite young in the events leading up to Culloden, losing friends at every turn, and then losing almost everyone he

ever cared about when that decisive battle could not be averted. I’m sure the losses weighed on him at times, but Jamie had always possessed that gallows humor, the ability to take the darkness and twist it sideways to find

that bit of mirth, that image of death slipping on a banana peel.

“Don’t fash Sassenach, none of the scrapes were that close,” Jamie informed me, leaning in for a quick kiss, clearly reading every word I just thought like the text printed out across my forehead.

I gave him an evil glare and then a sheepish smile, and we set about to scrounge up a breakfast from what Andrew and Bree had left behind.

~~~~~

While Claire and Brianna braved the heather and walked the grounds, I had a chance to talk alone with Andrew at length for the first time since we arrived. He’d been doting on Brianna, so glad to meet my child, and see for

himself that I was not insane, and that his trust all these years had been the right move.

“I’m proud of you,” Andrew said to me, making me feel like a child in need of a father’s approval, and maybe it was true – I had confided so much of myself to his keeping, and other than his son, Griff, he had shared it with

no one. But in these few days, he could pass those secrets along to my daughter, unburden himself, knowing his son was not the sole keeper of his memories about me.

“So how did you finally find her?” Andrew asked.

“I stopped trying, and two days later I saw her – but I wouldna have been in Boston had Griff not asked me to come. I couldna believe it at first, years…centuries, and suddenly, my heart was pounding in my throat. It wasna
until the third time I saw her I knew it was real, and then it was so real…and when we touched,”
the tears in my eyes flowed down my face.

Andrew smiled at me.

“You deserve to be happy, my boy, and I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you more so. It gladdens me.”

I smiled through my tears, knowing that second only to me, Andrew wanted my reunion with
Claire and Brianna. He knew what it was to lose the love of his life, but he’d had the child to raise,
had that tangible link to the

woman he lost, while I had to dream, imagine the child I’d made with Claire until these last few
months. A surge of energy rushed through my body as I thought about the moment I knew Claire
was carrying my child again,

and the stabbing pain that following it when I knew I must send her away for the very life of that
child. But it had worked. Claire lived; Brianna was born; I found them again. And I was able to
share my fortunate fate with my

oldest living friend.

I saw Andrew open his arms to me, inviting me, wordlessly, to give him a hug. I patted his back,
firmly but gently and let out a sigh.

“Cherish them,” Andrew advocated.

“Always,” I answered, fighting back more tears.

~~~~~

I knew it was quite unlikely I would ever see Andrew again. He would soon celebrate his ninety-
third birthday, so I enjoyed listening to his stories about Jamie and Griff while I could. Bree had
developed an interesting

repartee with the man in such a short time that I often felt like an interloper. At times, as I listened
to her talk in reply to something Andrew asked, I wondered if I sometimes had expectations that I
had put on Brianna. Did I

make her act in ways contrary to who she now was? I was caught off guard how adult she seemed,
but also delighted by it. We shared the remainder of Thursday, and half of Friday with Andrew,
giving him many

opportunities to divulge what he wished to each of us. While alone with our host, he thanked me
for being real. It was a unique experience to be thanked for my existence. I guess Andrew had held
a nagging doubt all these

years about the love Jamie expounded whenever the spirit moved him to speak about me and the
child he wished to find some day. I guess it would seem too good to be true until confronted by it
directly. There were times

I began to wonder if my love of Jamie had been intensified in my mind, so Andrew’s doubts were
no surprise.

He was an endearing man, if a bit gruff. While it had been a bit difficult to cram this trip into our
wedding plans, I was glad we did it after seeing how much Jamie and Brianna enjoyed themselves
here. It was beautiful
country, and beautiful company, and it had provided a respite, a bit of calm in the whirlwind of it
all.

~~~~~
It was late Friday when we got back to the manse. Instead of inconveniencing Roger or Fiona, we rented a car, well, rather, an SUV, once we had de-trained in Inverness. It would come in handy this weekend for our sojourn to Lallybroch, which even now was well off the beaten path. I was quite looking forward to seeing the house and the lands again, and showing it all to Brianna.

It was actually the first time I had ridden in a car that Jamie was driving. We’d shared horses and wagons and carriages numerous times, but this was new. Brianna happily spread out in the back seat.

“God, I’m starving,” she complained.

“I’m sure Fiona has something cooked up, and we’re not too late,” I assured her as I looked over my shoulder.

“I hope so,” Bree sighed.

The lights of the manse were a welcome sight, as were Fiona and Roger. Fee had held dinner, and greeted us warmly upon our return to her table. She got us filled to the brim, unwanting to move, and then started her questions.

“So, you’ll be off to see Lallybroch next?” Fee questioned.

“Oh Sunday,” Jamie answered. “I got through to Joe, the caretaker, and he’ll be meeting us there. I can’t wait for you to see it,” he said to Brianna. “Lifetimes of Frasers and Murrays, and so on, lived there for years and years,
and then I bought it back

after an unexpected return to the land found that it still had my heart. So much of who I am is intertwined with that land, and

the only real home Claire and I ever shared was Lallybroch.”

“Sounds like it was a fine home,” Fiona agreed.

“Aye,” Jamie said with a proud smile.

“Yes,” I said, looking at Jamie’s smile, and matching it.

“Och, I know that look. Bree, I think we should leave them alone,” Fiona cajoled, leading Bree into the study. “Come along,

Roger.”

~~~~

We arrived at Lallybroch using the same road Jamie and I had used the first time. The archway was gone, allowing our small SUV to pull up within feet of the doorway. I was surprised, but, Jamie, having been here a number of times over the years, and many times since he reacquired the property, didn’t seem to notice.

As I surveyed the great harled structure, I saw the ravages of time, but I also saw the years of family, humanity at its best, that lived here, whom I lived with, when Jamie and I were first here. Brianna only saw the ravages of time, and her face showed it.

“I know it’s no much to look at now,” he murmured as he caught up behind Brianna, “But, it was... quite grand in its day.”
She glanced at him, apologetically.

“I’m just thinking what it would take to fix it, that’s all.”

“You’ve got enough of your mother’s glass face – I can see you’re disappointed.”

Bree was preparing to answer him when a car came into the yard. Jamie turned toward the vehicle and beamed a smile in the direction of the driver.

“Joe’s here,” he told Bree, and he signaled me over with a tilt of his head.

Jamie trotted over to the car and grabbed the man in a raucous manner, hugging him and patting his back over and over.

“Hey, old man,” I heard the new arrival say to Jamie, and I swear I heard my soon to be husband giggling. After a prolonged greeting, Jamie put an arm around the man’s back and walked him over to us.

“I would like to introduce you two to Joe – Joseph Ransom Abernathy MacLeod.”

I extended my hand.

“I’m Claire, so pleased to meet you,” I offered.

He gave my hand a gentle squeeze and smiled heartily with a friendly nod.

“So, he finally found you,” Joe said in reply. “I can see why he looked for so long.”

“Oh, how sweet of you to say, thank you.”
That’s when I noticed Brianna’s fixed stare. She was looking at Joseph as if he was an alien life form. Her mouth was slightly ajar.

“Bree?” I asked, but she continued to stare.

It was beginning to unnerve the man, and he looked to Jamie to see if he had an explanation. Jamie was, in turn, staring at Brianna, unable to understand her reaction. Joe looked back at me with a fishy grin and disbelieving subtle nod.

“Has the girl never seen a black man before?”

“She grew up in Boston, so I doubt that’s the issue,” Jamie offered.

“Bree, you’re being rude,” I admonished, having to actually shake her to break her stare.

“I’m sorry – you have the most remarkable blue eyes.”

“Well, you have the old man here to thank for that,” he said with a jubilant tone.

Brianna looked confused, and then I realized she was missing some rather important and relevant facts of the situation.

“Bree,” I began, putting my hand on her shoulder, “Joe is Jamie’s six times great grandson.”


“Aye,” Jamie replied, “He’s from William’s line.”
We toured what of the house and grounds we could safely traverse with Joe as our guide. He’d been keeping an eye on the property for Jamie for a long time now, coming out periodically to make sure the house was still secure, and that no one had decided to vandalize what was still standing of the out-buildings.

“So, how long have you been looking after Lallybroch?” I asked as we slowly walked up to the tower.

“Och, probably twenty years now, more than thirty if you count from when Jamie started bringing me out here, but it launched my career in a way – I’m a property manager, so taking care of this place was a good training ground. And this one made sure I had all the practical skills I would ever need,” Joe ribbed Jamie good-naturedly.

Brianna was quietly and methodically taking in her surroundings, lagging a few steps behind the three of us. As the only one of us without endearing memories of this property, her experience was bound to be very different.

“Is she always that quiet?” Joe asked me as he pointed his head back at Bree.

I smiled.

“She can get…introspective at times,” I replied, looking back at her myself.

“So, old man, looks like you got yourself an instant family,” Joe propounded.

“Aye,” Jamie breathed out.

Never had a small word said so much. All manner of emotions were contained in those three
Jamie’s smile was so encompassing I thought his cheeks might spring a leak and let his expression creep right up to his eyebrows.

We reached the foot of the tower – most of the stonework was intact, or at least still here scattered nearby, but the same could not be said for anything made of wood. We peeked in through the rotted away door.

“Because of the way it was built, the steps are still strong,” Joe informed us.

“But these floors look suspect,” Jamie added, “Be careful should you climb up there,” Jamie warned Brianna.

She nodded.

“A lot more of the barns and sheds are gone now,” Jamie concluded, looking around wistfully.

“I was about to say the same thing,” I injected into the conversation.

“So, you were familiar with the layout here?” Joe asked of me.

“Jamie and I lived here for a time…but that was a long time ago,” I answered.

Joe nodded in understanding, “Oh, that’s right, I should have remembered.”

I had grown to really love this place in each of the short times we had lived here, and it was hard to see it so run-down. I was sure it was even harder for Jamie to see it so, for he had many more years of living here.

~~~~~

When they headed back down to the house, Jamie and Claire took their time after noticing Brianna
falling into step with Joe.

She had relaxed considerably, and turned to smile at him as they walked.

“So, is this the first time you’ve seen the place?” Joe asked.

“Yeah – I didn’t know about any of this – which is probably my own fault. I didn’t let my mom talk about my dad. It was easier
to believe he was dead, because what my mom did tell me…”

“It’s quite something to wrap one’s mind around,” Joe agreed.

“So you know…”

“Everything,” Joe said with a smirk and a tilt of his head.

“How old were you when you met Jamie?” Brianna inquired.

“No more than seven, I’d say, but I wouldn’t be who I am today if not for him. In fact, I’d likely have gotten myself killed if he
hadn’t taken me in hand.”

Bree’s mouth dropped open slightly, unsure how to continue.

“After my father died, I stopped listening to everyone – and I was none too happy with Jamie either. He’d come back when my
father had not. I blamed him for the plane crash. I mean – how could he have survived and my father not? But that man does
not give up. He was determined to give me a father figure whether I wanted one or not. So he got through to me the only way
he could – he told me why he had been able to come back when the rest of the band perished.”
Bree took in a quick surprised breath as her eyes registered understanding.

“Threat of Thunder; Threat of Rain?” she quickly asked.

Joe smiled and chuckled.

“So you do know some of the story,” he teased.

“I knew the band existed, I didn’t know they’d been killed,” she apologetically toned.

“It’s a long time ago, lass. No reason to be sad now.”

Bree nodded.

“Jamie set me straight. We’d come here in the summers, live rough – camp out,” he sought to clarify. “I learned to hunt and garden, work with wood and stone. I learned to be self-reliant, and who and how to trust.”

“I wish I’d had that,” Brianna softly admitted, her brows furrowing.

Joe looked at Bree compassionately.

“So when did you two meet?” he asked.

“July,” she said as a guffaw, almost not believing it herself.

“Och, lass, I had no idea it was so recent…You know he’s been looking for you for a really long time. More than once he told me about his plans once he found you and your mam. He was in love with the idea of you, not knowing if you even came to
Bree blushed and smiled, biting her bottom lip.

“How old are you, if I may ask?”

“I just turned twenty,” she shyly murmured, shoving her hands in her pockets as they came down into the yard behind the house.

“I’ve got a daughter just a hair older – she’ll be twenty-one in a couple of months.”

“Is she your only child?”

“Until a few years ago, that answer would have been yes. I have three year old twin boys as well. Sometimes I think they’re keepin’ me young, other times, they make me feel old as dirt.”

Bree laughed, and then she let out a sigh as she scanned the house.

“I know it isna saying much, but the house has held up pretty well considering all it’s been through. The original kitchen and pantry, as well as a number of the upstairs bedrooms are still quite livable. Somewhere along the line they wedged a water closet in on the second floor.”

A glint came up in Brianna’s eyes.

“Would it…be safe for someone to spend the night?”

Joe’s eyebrows raised at her question.
“I…suppose,” he faltered.

~~~~~

Jamie and I caught up with Brianna and Joe, and seemed to interrupt their conversation.

“So, lass,” Jamie began, “do you want to take on the responsibility of restoring your ancestral home? My girl is only months away from being an architect,” he proudly informed his surrogate son.

“Och, that’s wonderful,” Joe said, turning from Jamie to Bree.

“It’ll be a big job, and I can’t imagine it will be cheap…”

“I’ve been putting aside funds for a really long time. Once I re-acquired the property, I dedicated some of the monies to the thought of making this a home again…but I wanted to have my family first.”

Jamie put an arm around my waist and reached his other hand out for Brianna. She curled her fingers around Jamie’s as a tentative grin came up on her face. Joe nodded thoughtfully at the scene before him, and I watched him fish something out of his pocket.

“It’s such a big job,” Brianna forecasted, shaking her head, “And I don’t even know the local codes…”

“I trust ye,” Jamie said reassuringly.

“As do I,” Joe threw in, offering her the key that had been in his pocket.
“I was going to hand this over to you, old man,” he said, jangling the key on the ring, “but…”

“Take the key, Bree,” I encouraged.

“Can I think about it?” she nervously asked, not wanting to hurt anyone’s feelings.

“Of course,” Jamie burred.

~~~~~

Before we left Lallybroch, Joe told us he could no longer be the caretaker. His visits were getting farther apart due to his other time commitments, both for work and family, and the destruction of several out-buildings had left him feeling quite guilty. I knew Jamie was disappointed, but he took the key from Joe, and gave him a protracted hug, acknowledging all he’d done over the years to keep the place from decaying into oblivion.

“See you tomorrow for the rehearsal dinner, and the next day for the wedding?” Jamie hopefully asked.

“You couldn’t keep me away if ye tried – I don’t get to wear my kilt all that often!”

“And I bet you look grand in the MacLeod tartan,” I surmised.

“That he does, Sassenach, even if it is a bit garish!”

“Careful there, old man,” Joe warned in jest, breaking into a broad smile.

Joe and Jamie grabbed each other once more, and I heard Jamie whisper, “When Bree fixes this
place up, you’ll come help us celebrate,” out of Brianna’s hearing, quite sure his daughter would accept the challenge, but not wanting to force her hand.

Joe gave me a hug as well, and as we pulled back, I said, “I’m looking forward to seeing you in your tartan, and meeting your family.”

“Our family,” he corrected.

“Yes,” I stated, seeing in his eyes what had caught Brianna off-guard. Those strong genetics were amazing.

~~~~~

“I need some time to think,” Bree said to me as she sped into the manse and up the stairs to her room.

“What’s with her?” Fiona asked, having barely seen a blur of Brianna pass by.

“Jamie has offered Bree the job of restoring Lallybroch once she gets her architect degree, and her head has been swimming with the prospect ever since.”

“Oh, my – she’d do it proud, I’m sure,” Fiona extolled, “What seems to be her worry about it?”

“She mentioned different building codes here in Scotland, but I think it has more to do with having such a big project all in her control, and the possibility of disappointing her father.”

“Well, I canna help with her confidence, but you do remember my Wake is an architect, specializing in restoration – perhaps
she could consult with him on what needs to be done before she makes up her mind one way or t’ other.”

“Would he be willing?”

“I think I could convince him,” Fee avowed.

“Before you do any arm twisting, let me check with Bree.”

“Too bad he’s not available for the rehearsal dinner or the wedding, I twist arms so much better in person, not to mention, should he get one look at that daughter of yours…well, his head’s been turned by far less.”

“How old is he now?” I asked Fee of her youngest child. “No, wait, he was six when Bree was born if I remember right, so he’d be twenty-six now?”

“Aye, and he’s quite the strapping lad. He’s so like Roger. He looks like him more-so than any of the others, and he’s got that twinkle in his eye.”

“I know what it’s like to raise a child whose father shines through so clearly,” I absently uttered, looking back up, Fee seeing the amazement I had on my face for saying those words.

“Och, I know you do,” she said, reaching out to touch my hand. “Bree and Jamie have that likeness that Roger and Wake share. It can be remarkable.”

Fiona shook her head thinking, I’m sure, like me, about those moments where, as a mother, you are struck by how much of the man you love is there in the face of your child. Fee sucked in a breath and breathed it back out, clearing her chest of the
tightness such emotions can create.

“Well, then, I’ll give him a call if you think Bree would like to consult with ‘im.”

“I’ll go ask.”

~~~~

Bree was curled up in a ball on her bed when she told me I could come in. I nestled in behind her and put my arms around her, brushing her hair back so it didn’t get in my mouth.

“I know you were surprised by your father’s offer.”

“He’s only known me for six months, and he trusts me to rebuild this place that he puts so much importance on – how does that make sense?” she inflected.

“He’s a very good judge of people – reads them, sees potential. This is not a ‘gimmie’ because you’re his daughter.”

“You sure?” she questioned her mother.

“Oh, I’m sure…but he won’t force you to take this on if you don’t want to – “

“I want to,” she quickly shot out, “but…how do I say yes, when I’m afraid of ruining it?”

I smiled and tucked my head down behind her shoulder.

“I know confidence is sometimes hard fought for you, but you are always your best when facing down what scares you the
most. You may twist yourself in knots along the way, but I have never known you to fail when something you truly wanted was on the line.”

“But, it’ll mean moving here, away from you, away from the father I’ve just met – and I haven’t got a clue about pulling permits, or codes and practices in Scotland. I’d be lost, swallowed up by red tape.”

“What if someone who knew all those things could talk you through what to expect?” I offered.

“Who?” Brianna spewed, “Who could I trust to help me, but not take over? I don’t know anybody like that!”

“I might.”

Bree pulled free and turned to look at me. One raised eyebrow looked down at me. I sat and took her hands.

“Fee’s youngest – he’s an architect, does restorations, so he’s bound to know the local codes and customs – he probably knows who to hire and who to avoid as well. Fee’s willing to ask him to survey the property with you, give you an honest appraisal, but only if you want to.”

Bree’s face brightened. I wouldn’t quite call it a smile, but I saw the weight lift off her shoulders.

“Yes.”

~~~~~

The rehearsal dinner was more of a raucous party than a formal occasion. Roger had made arrangements with his ‘local’ to
take over the entire pub for the night. The regulars were well warned of the impending crowds, and invited to be part of the

celebration. Some of the more quiet drinkers had chosen to steer clear, but there were some stalwarts who’d not miss a night

perched on their regular stool on a Monday night.

Claire, Jamie, Brianna, Fiona and Roger were first in the door to make sure everything was set up. The brass had been polished

al around the bar, and all the tables had been arranged in two long lines, and were draped in white paper tablecloths to make

it appear like banquet tables instead of many individual tables.

Roger smiled as the smell of myriad foods invaded his nostrils.

“Cover me,” he whispered to Jamie, “I’m havin’ a sneak into the kitchen.”

He got two steps away when Fiona’s voice boomed out, “Roger MacKenzie!”

He turned on his heel.

“Yes, hen?” he attentively spoke.

She shook her head. Roger shrugged his shoulders.

“I had tae try.”

Soon after that there was a steady stream of MacKenzies and the clans they’d married into making their way into the pub, all

being introduced by Fiona.

~~~~~
Gem arrived, dressed as a civilian. As a man who spent most of his time dressed in black, his casual clothing seemed unduly bright, but perhaps he was making up for time, and being the peacock when he was free of his collar. Speaking of peacock, that was the shade of blue/green he was wearing – a piqué polo with the buttons undone and nice pair of dark denims. He still looked quite youthful, and with Roger’s genetics, he had the possibility of looking young for some time to come.

“And of course you know Ruth,” Fiona said to me, almost jokingly.

“Of course,” I replied, giving Gem’s wife, Brianna’s first baby sitter, a quick hug, “None of girls came?”

“They’re sitting with the young ones – not just mine, all of them. They’ll be at the wedding, though. But I fear introductions will have to wait until the reception.”

“No doubt,” I said with a nod.

Fiona tried to move traffic along, giving Ruth an encouraging tap.

“We’ll circle back to each other before the night is through,” Ruth encouraged as she waded into the depths of the pub, sucked along by the current.

I waved as she shrank into the distance.

“You’ve heard me speak about Janet often, but you’ll not have actually met, will you? She was away during the years you were with us – Janet, come meet Claire – oh, and this is Janet’s husband Robert.”
“Nice to finally meet you,” I said, reciprocating as she leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, “Robert?”

“Aye, a pleasure,” he burred, soon distracted by an hors d’oeuvres tray that passed under his nose.

“Like I said before, the other two boys, Rabbie and Wake, couldn’a be here, but here’s Abigail, you remember her?”

“Of course.”

“And this is Duncan, her husband.”

He offered a very firm handshake and a nod, but said nothing.

He took Abigail by the hand and shielded her as they made their way to the bar. I followed in their wake until I could find Jamie.

“You made yourself scarce – I thought you’d want to be there for the introductions.”

“Och, well…” Jamie leaned down so as not to have to yell to be heard, “I helped Roger acquired some delicacies from the kitchen while Fiona was distracted from watching every morsel that entered his mouth.”

I cast a controlled smile toward the man I was marrying tomorrow, and exhaled deeply. It was hard to believe we’d been separated so long, for I found myself feeling the same euphoria I did when I was first falling in love with him. While the years had changed much in Jamie in terms of knowledge and experience, so much of him was still the young man I’d met those first months before and after our initial meeting and marriage. He gave me a nice lingering kiss and a squeeze around the middle.
“I’m going to mingle,” I told him, getting back into the flow of traffic headed to and from the buffet.

~~~~~~

Jamie signaled to Joe as he saw him enter the room. Joe made his way over, Jamie’s smile growing as he came closer to where Jamie was standing with Roger.

“Hey, old man,” Joe once more harangued Jamie, garnering a moment of one sided smirk.

“Roger,” Jamie alerted, pulling Joe in to his side by the arm. Once he had his arm around Joe’s back, he opened his mouth to introduce the pair, but was cut off by Joe turning and saying, “Hey Professor.”

“Joe?” Roger questioned, hoping he had placed the face properly.

“Small world,” Joe beamed as the two of them embraced.

Jamie stood there and screwed up his mouth as he took in the scene.

“So…I take it you two know each other?” Jamie finally came out with.

“We’ve sat in together in a few pub talent nights over the years,” Roger warmly recounted.

“How do you two…” Roger wavered a hand between the pair.

Jamie sucked in a breath and stood up tall.

“Joe, here, is my great great…great great…great…great grandson.”
Roger began nodding.

“Och – small world indeed.”

“How about you two?” Joe asked.

Roger and Jamie looked warmly at each other and simultaneously said, “Claire,” in a lingering lilt.

“Roger and Fiona looked after Claire when she first arrived – took care of her and made sure Brianna came safely into the world.”

Jamie arched his back slightly, happily reliving the feeling that had washed over him when he’d first re-found Claire just six months prior.

“Speaking of Claire,” Joe interrupted Jamie’s daydream, “I’d love to introduce her to my wife. Can you see either one of them?”

“I think they may have made their own introductions,” Jamie replied as he pointed in their general direction with his chin.

Claire was engaged in conversation with a woman who stood nearly as tall as she did. Her long, dark, and extremely curly tresses bobbed playfully around her face as the two openly laughed like they were old friends. Jamie was enjoying their interactions almost as much as they were. He gave Joe a pat on the shoulder and began drifting across the room.

“I’ll just be sayin’ hello to your beautiful Finn.”
Joe smiled as Jamie slipped through the crowd, leaving Roger and Joe to catch up.

“How’s my wild Irish Rose?” he exclaimed.

“Jamie Fraser, it’s been way too long!” Fionnula MacLeod squealed as he swept her up into his arms.

Claire stood back, a warm feeling enveloping her as she watched Jamie’s beaming face. It was clear Joe’s wife held great affection for Jamie, and as he put her back down and held her at arm’s length to get a good look at her, an expression of realization came over his face.

There was a certain level of similarity between Fionnula and Claire. Both pale skinned and flecked with nearly invisible freckles, the two of them could have been sisters.

“I’m a domesticated Irish Rose now. I haven’t been wild in a very long time.”

“As you say, but…” Jamie rebuked, “not too tamed I’m sure,” he toned in her ear.

Jamie turned to Claire and took her hand.

“Claire, you’ve met Finn? She’s Joe’s wife!”

“We were just sorting that out.”

He hugged each woman with a single arm.

“Och, Sassenach, I’m sure you’ll be fast friends.”
Joe and Roger had made their way across the room to Jamie, Claire and Fionnula.

“Roger,” Fionnula brightly greeted.

“Hallo there, Finn.”

“Looks like we’ve got a good start for the house band,” she commented.

“Not tonight, dear. Tonight, Fee and I are the ersatz parents of the bride, and oddly enough, cousins of the groom!”

Finn laughed heartily, giving Roger a squeezing hug.

“I’d hate to put this family tree to paper.”

Claire scouted the room, but still tried to listen to the conversation around her.

“Something wrong, Sassenach?” Jamie inquired.

“I was hoping to spot Brianna. I wanted to introduce her to Finn.”

“You’ll get your chance, I’m sure of it.”

Jamie leaned in to speak directly in Claire’s ear.

“She’s still a bit skittish about the hugging masses. She’s been keeping her hands full to prevent unwanted embraces, toting food and drink about.”

Claire nodded.
“So you’ve both played with Roger?” Claire asked Joe and Finn, trying to get back into the conversation.

“Joe? You play the bass, right?” Claire asked, getting an affirmative nod. “So what do you play, Finn?”

“I’m a percussionist,” she replied, almost haughtily.

“She just hates being called a drummer!” Joe informed us with a smirk. “Isna that right, my drummer?”

Fionnula growled at her husband.

“What I do is far beyond drumming,” she chided. “You yourself said you’d never seen anyone take to the bodhran like I did,”

she challenged Roger.

“I couldn’t get her hands off my bodhran once she had it in her grasp!” Roger told us, all innuendo intended.

“I can never get her hand off my bodhran either,” Joe said with a smirk that instantly reminded Claire of Jamie’s smile when he

had said something laced with sexual overtones.

~~~~~

Fluctuating groups of conversation formed and changed, ebbed and flowed through the entire pub until Roger silenced the

crowd, which was mostly comprised of his family.

“Find a seat, everyone, if you could, please.”
The stalwarts at the bar all turned to face out if they weren’t already, ready to drink to whatever was proposed in the toasts they were sure were forthcoming. Jamie and Claire took side by side seats roughly in the middle of the long table for seating, Brianna to Claire’s left and Fiona next to that.

“Alright now,” Roger said a bit more forcefully, as those assembled were finding their seats with all the decorum of a cattle stampede in slow motion.

“Friends and family, at this time Father Padhraig McBride, who will join our happy couple tomorrow, will cut the haggis and recite the Burns poem over it.”

Roger yielded the floor to the priest with the leftward wave of his hand.

“Address to a Haggis,” The priest announced, holding a knife in one hand, and a book held open to the page the poem sat on with the other hand.

“Afraid I don’t know it by heart,” he cautiously admitted to those assembled, garnering a ‘boo!’ from a single man at the bar.

It seemed to take a lifetime as he stumbled in places through the multi-stanza-ed poem, but the crowd reapplied their attention as he brought it into the home stretch.

“But mark the Rustic, haggis fed,
The trembling earth resounds his tread.
Clap in his walie nieve a blade,
He’ll mak it whissle;
An' legs an' arms, an' heads will sned,
Like taps o' thrissle.
Ye Pow'rs wha mak mankind your care,
And dish them out their bill o' fare,
Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware
That jaups in luggies;
But, if ye wish her gratefu' prayer,
Gie her a haggis!"

And with the last word, he made a plunging cut into the haggis, as if stabbing into the heart of a great creature. The applause rose and subsided quickly as Father McBride handed the blade to Jamie’s hand. He looked the length of the table, taking in all the faces. He cast a glance down at the blade in his hand, mumbling, “this holy iron I hold in my hand.”

“Thank-you, father, well, I’ll not keep you that long, with all manner of unnecessary words.”

Jamie raised his glass.

“Slainte Mhath.”

The whole room seemed to repeat his toast and take their drink.

~~~~~

After the haggis had been presented, all the toasts offered, and everyone had eaten at least something, Brianna escaped the hubbub, slipping into the bathroom until she was ready to face the crowd again. The Scots were a far huggier group than she was used to, leading Bree to have to avoid contact frequently during the evening without appearing too aloof. She was looking at herself in the mirror when someone stepped up to the other sink. Bree gave her a shy smile and a nod.

“Hi,” Bree softly said.
“Hi,” the other girl answered, “Feeling a little outta place?”

“How’d you guess? Kinda ironic, too, since this is for my parents,” Brianna divulged to this virtual stranger.

“So you’re Brianna…my parents kept saying I should try to meet you, told me we were close in age and they were sure we’d hit it off.”

“Parents can be clueless,” Bree tossed out there. “Brianna Fraser,” she introduced, holding out her hand.

“Cassidy MacLeod,” she replied, shaking the proffered extremity.

“Oh, you’re Joe’s daughter? And I met your mom earlier tonight. There’s so much family I never knew anything about, but…I like knowing I have people. For so long it was just Mom and me.”

“You didn’t know your dad?” Cassidy inquired.

“I just met him six months ago, before that, I kinda thought he was dead, or that my mom just made him up.”

“Oh,” Cassidy sadly toned, her eyes narrowing.

“What is it?” Bree asked.

“It’s just…I’ve known him since I was little. He’s been one of my parent’s best friends…”

“I know…I know it’s OK – it’s a long weird story.”
Brianna beamed a smile at Cassidy, putting her at ease.

The two young ladies left the rest room and continued to talk.

~~~~

Brianna was careful with her words as she talked with Cassidy, not knowing how much she knew about her parent’s peculiarities, but soon finding out Cassidy had been read in to the situation.

“He was just mam and da’s friend. He’d come around every so often, bring gifts, take me to the playground. But one day, after he’d dropped me off home, I came back outside and it looked like he’d been crying. I remember asking what was wrong. He shook his head no, ‘nothing’s wrong,’ he said. My da came up to us then, and I saw them looking at each other, and after a bit, my da just nodded.

‘I’ve…misplaced my family – I sent them somewhere to be safe, but when I got to where they were supposed to be, they were missing.’

‘Can I help you look?’ I asked, naively.

He leaned in close and looked both ways.

‘I sent them through time,’ he whispered, ‘and I canna seem to catch up with them, or I’ve passed them by, either way I havna seen them in a long time – many, many years.”’

“I asked him ‘how many years?’ – I was only about eight, so I’m not sure what I thought ‘a long
time’ meant. ‘You really want
to know?’ he asked. I nodded ‘yes’ eagerly, and he leaned into my ear once more. ‘Two hundred
and fifty years.’”

“What did you think?” Brianna asked with great interest.

“I really didn’t know what to think,” Cassidy replied, “other than was he crazy.”

“That sounds familiar – I asked my mom what asylum they escaped from.”

Cassidy laughed.

“It does seem crazy, doesn’t it? But we know better, don’t we?” Cassidy articulated.

Bree suddenly looked forlorn. She clasped her own hands together and sighed out a breath.

“Did I say something wrong?” Cassidy asked.

“No…I just…it’s all too much sometimes. I’ve found this all out in the last six months. And the
moment I feel like there’s
nothing left to surprise me, something new comes out into the light. Instead of waiting for the next
shoe to drop, I find myself
awaiting the whole shoe store.”

Cassidy put her hand over Bree’s.

“I’ve had a little more time with it. If you need someone to talk with, I’m here.”

“I’d like that. Anyone else who I can talk freely with is…older…” Bree trailed off.
“And they don’t always understand?” Cassidy extrapolated.

Brianna nodded as she curled her lips into her mouth.

“We’re kinda sisters, six times removed,” Cassidy concluded, “I’ve always wanted a sister – someone I could confide everything to.”

“I’ll be headed back to Boston for the next few months, but after I graduate from college, I think I’ll be coming back.”

“You think?” Cass asked.

“My dad wants me to restore Lallybroch, and I’m pretty sure I’m gonna say yes. And while I’m sure Fiona and Roger and their whole family will be here for me, it would be nice to have a friend my own age,” Brianna confessed.

“You have one,” was Cassidy’s reply.

~~~~~

Claire, Jamie, Joe and Finn found Brianna and Cassidy still talking when the night had wound down and most of the people had left.

“Did I not say it?” Finn extolled, seeing the pair sitting together, “I said you two would hit it off.”

“Yes, mam,” Cassidy toned, rolling her eyes so only Brianna could see.

Bree smirked.
“Well, it’s time we were going,” Joe enlightened his first born. “By the time I get them home it will be time to start primping for the wedding.”

Finn gave Joe a swat on the back for that comment and a fearsome look.

“I know – I’m the one who needs all the primping time,” Joe admitted, “That kilt takes some work to make it look right.”

Jamie patted his descendant on the shoulder.

“You need to wear it more often, get a more practiced hand,” Jamie informed him.

“If I could, I’d wear it every day,” Joe declared.

“I think you could bring it back into style,” Claire reassured. “I know I wouldn’t mind seeing more kilts – I think they’re striking.”

“Aye, but not always practical in modern life,” Jamie notified.

~~~~~~~~

Just as we were all headed up the stairs to get as much needed sleep as was possible before the wedding, I noticed Bree lagging at the foot of the stairs. Just before we were out of sight, she choked out, “Jamie?”

He stopped, and I turned and stopped as well.

“Can I have the key? For Lallybroch?...I need to see it again.”
“Does this mean…?” Jamie tried to draw words from Brianna, hoping she was about to tell him she’d made up her mind.

“I don’t know yet,” she said, cutting Jamie off before he could get his hopes too high.

Jamie did not question her further, just pulled the key out of his pocket, and tossed it to her. It landed in her hand like it knew the way there, landing solidly and staying put. Jamie raised one eyebrow and nodded courtly at our daughter. She closed her hand over the key and brought it in against her heart, smiling reassuringly up at both of us.

I wanted to be able to read her mind, or go to her, but there was a look on her face that said her guard was going up, and she would not be receptive. I found Jamie’s hand and gave it a quick tug. We continued to our room while Brianna held her position.

“I wanted to run down those steps and spin her around in my arms,” Jamie confessed after we closed the door.

“Would it help if you spun me instead?” I offered.

Jamie sealed his lips to mine, but picked me up and spun me as well, keeping me from waking the house with my sounds of delight. I felt a little wobbly, still spinning on the inside long after Jamie had placed me back on my feet. It had been a long, eventful day, and tomorrow promised to be even longer. I closed my eyes to center myself.

“Already asleep?” I heard burr next to my ear.

“Yes,” I jested, “I need to save up as much energy as I can for tomorrow.”

“You’ll bear up. You have a well of strength that has proven bottomless,” Jamie said as his hand
caressed my bottom.

I cracked one eye open.

“Save it for the honeymoon.”

~~~~~

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, you are all cordially invited to the re-wedding of Jamie and Claire. (FINALLY! - I heard you all saying it.)
And without further adieu...wedding time.

I couldn’t believe how much noise could be generated by people getting themselves ready for a wedding. I was afraid of getting caught in a staircase stampede. I wanted to soak in those last few minutes of sleep, but just as I lapsed back into that blissful state of drifting to the surface, Fiona knocked on my door.

“Brianna, dear, breakfast is waiting.”

I cracked one eye open.

“Did you hear me, dear?”

“Yes…I’m coming.”

As I sat up, I noticed my outfit for the wedding hanging in my room – it hadn’t been there the last time I’d opened my eyes. Fiona the magic elf had been very busy already today. I looked both ways in the hallway, and slipped into the bathroom. No one was trying to hurry me along, so I took a quick shower. I wrapped my hair in a towel and got back to my room before anyone seemed to notice. I put on everything else but the coat, afraid I’d spill something on it before we left for the church, and pulled my sweatshirt on to cover up. I could finish with my hair after I ate.

Jamie was finishing his breakfast when I made my bleary-eyed entrance into the kitchen.

“Mornin’ lass,” he said, looking like a man who was trying too hard to be composed.
“You’re allowed to be nervous, you know,” I said.

He grinned at me.

“I was nervous the first time – afraid she’d not go through with it, desperately scared she’d not be mine,” Jamie recalled, clearly ensconced in the past, “This time, there’s no need – she’s been mine all along, we’re just letting the rest of the world know.”

“If you say so,” I mumbled.

It wasn’t until I sat down to eat that Jamie noticed what I was dressed in.

“You’re no wearing that?” he suddenly erupted.

“My coat is upstairs still – I didn’t want to wear a giant jam stain to the wedding.”

“Time to get dressed,” Fiona instructed Jamie as she came into the kitchen, “Roger’s cleared a space in the study for the donning of the kilts, and he’s in there pleating his as we speak. Your items are hanging by the fireplace to get the creases out, tsk, tsk,” she admonished wordlessly.

Jamie raised an eyebrow at me and smiled sheepishly, and I almost choked as I laughed.

“You alright, dear?” Fiona asked.

I gave her a thumb’s up, because any attempt to speak would just trigger another round of coughing.

As he stood, Jamie curved his hand around my shoulder and nodded at me. He looked happy, and I was glad for him.
“I did intend to hang it up myself,” Jamie softly spoke to Fiona as he approached her, “but it slipped my mind…thank you,” he said with a nod, and open arms that Fiona easily slipped into. I found myself fighting a wave of intense emotions, having to breathe slowly to alleviate the strange feelings. I guess, in part, I was…jealous that a hug was such a simple undertaking for everybody else, and so…traumatizing for me with anyone other than my mom.

Jamie smiled broadly as he headed out of the room, a spring in his step.

“Make sure you eat something hearty this morning, it may not seem it, but we are hours away from the reception, and that’s the next time you’ll get to eat today,” Fiona warned me.

I wasn’t really hungry yet – my body and brain were convinced I should still be asleep. I took a chance I’d be able to eat with my mom when it was her shift to get ready – Fiona made sure my parents were on separate schedules, pulling Jamie out of his bed before my mom woke to avert bad luck. (I wouldn’t be surprised if my mom faked being asleep just to keep Fiona from being too upset!)

~~~~~

“Jamie!” Roger said with gusto as he entered the study.

“I’ll be but a minute,” he said, lowering himself down to his pleated plaid.

“I’ve always preferred the feileadh mhor – each of the boys got one once they could handle the weight of all this fabric – Jem will be wearin’ his today, as he’s a guest, and not presiding over the ceremony. I wish the other boys could be here, but alas…give us a hand.”

Jamie helped get Roger to his feet once more.

“That’s another great thing about the kilt – no worries as to whether it will fit!”

Jamie nodded as he collected his breacan and unfurled it across the floor. He made short work of the pleats, and then quickly exchanged his tee for his dress shirt and dropped his jeans off beneath.
“Such ease of movement,” Roger lamented, shaking his head, as he watched Jamie get himself dressed and back on his feet without assistance.

“Aye, but I suffered incapacitation often in my early life, and understand its affect.”

“Och, I know. Claire shared your trials, and it was always a painful revelation for her…in a way, you’ve lived backward – been pained and crippled in youth, but freed of it as you age – consider yourself lucky that arthritis is not in your future.”

Jamie nodded, grabbing one hand with the other and rubbing with his thumb the spot on his palm where a nail driven by Black Jack Randall had once penetrated, the memory of the pain still palpable.

“Sorry if I dredged up any unpleasantness, this should be a day of joy and looking forward,” Roger apologetically groveled.

Jamie tilted his head and shot the one sided smiled momentarily.

“Let me help you with your coat,” Jamie offered.

“Aye, aye, and then I’ll give you a hand with yours, whether you need it or no.”

When Jamie went to the crate to get his boots, he saw the brooch he’d given to Brianna to wear today. He hoped she hadn’t forgotten about it. He slipped it into his sporran so at the very least it’d make it to the church and he could give it to her there.

“Is it safe to come in yet?” Brianna called out as Jamie pulled his second boot on and sprang to his feet.

“All clear,” Roger announced.
Bree made a bee-line for the crate, and Jamie made a bee-line for her.

“Is this what you’re lookin’ for, lass?” he asked, displaying the pin in his palm.

Brianna smiled and let a sigh of relief.

“Yes – where should I pin it? Shoulder? Lapel? Is there significance in locating it?”

Jamie smiled at her worry.

“Just so long as you wear it, you make me proud – now promise me you’ll get your mam to the church?”

“I’m surprised Fiona didn’t shove a chair under the doorknob to keep mom in her room until you left. Nothing is going to derail this wedding.”

Bree looked down for a moment, giving Jamie a side-eyed glance as she spied a bare kneecap. Without a word, Jamie stood back and did a turn.

“What d’ya think?” he asked.

“It’s a good look – not everybody could pull it off, but it looks right on you.”

“Am I included in that compliment?” Roger asked.

“It just takes a while to get used to the bare knees,” she said as she blushed.

“Alright now, time for the men-folk to head out so we can go about getting Claire ready. Shoo with you,” Fiona insisted.

Brianna wished she had her jacket on so she could attempt to escape with Jamie and Roger. She
followed them to the door and waved goodbye after the two of them had shoved all that tartan into Roger’s car.

“No time for dawdling, get your mam out of bed and down here for breakfast – and maybe you’ll actually take some sustenance. Last batch of muffins comes out of the oven soon, if nothin’ else catches your fancy.”

~~~~~

I walked up the stairs slowly and slipped into the room with mom. She was stretched out on her back, relaxed, but wide awake.

“Did you sleep at all?” I asked.

“I slept fine until Fiona dragged Jamie away – he was keeping me warm.”

She sat and stretched in the middle of the bed.

“Have they gone?” she asked.

“Just drove away – they looked good all dressed up,” I answered as I leaned against the closed door to the room.

“A kilt has its charms,” mom toned with a warm glint in her eyes.

“I have orders to present you for breakfast.”

Mom frowned.

“How am I supposed to think about food right now?”
“I couldn’t eat either. It’s too early, but Fiona is insisting.”

“Come here,” mom invited, reaching out her arms to me.

I sat on the bed and took her hands.

“You probably won’t see much of us for the next few days, so I wanted to make sure you’re OK.”

“I’m fine – I’ve got a lot to keep me busy. Fiona said she’d been able to set up a meeting with her son for the eighteenth. She’ll drive me out to Lallybroch herself, and then he’ll drive me back to my hotel.”

“Do you…remember him at all? From before we left Scotland, I mean.”

“I don’t think so. Should I?”

“You were a toddler, and he was just a little boy – and he looked a lot like Roger when he was a boy. I really only have a vague recollection of him myself. Not to worry – I’m sure he’ll tell you what you need to know to make your decision.”

“I hope so – I am leaning toward doing it – but that’s for another day. Today is your day – yours and Jamie’s. Is there anything I can do? I’ve made the arrangements for the luggage to be shipped to the hotel.”

“So we are going to be at the same hotel?” mom attempted to wheedle out of me.

I had been tight lipped about the after-wedding accommodations, and I wasn’t about to break now. I just smiled and held my tongue.

“You look just like him right now,” she breathed out, eyes filling with tears.
“Don’t do that, mom. It will just get me started, and we’ll both have puffy eyes in the pictures.”

“I don’t mean to…” mom snuffed, taking me into her arms.

“I wanted to hug him, so badly this morning,” I admitted, “and I know he wants me to… He knows, doesn’t he? That’s why he only tries to hold my hands now.”

“He asked – he sensed something had happened, and I wasn’t going to lie to him. He understands… we both do.”

I didn’t really react. I couldn’t. What do you say when your mom has as much as said both she and Jamie had been raped? It was not a topic to delve into today.

“Come on, breakfast, shower, dress for the wedding, get married – that’s the itinerary, and Fiona will be up here if we don’t make our appearance in her kitchen.”

Mom and I split a hot oatmeal muffin and some fruit before a desperate Fiona offered to make us anything to make us eat up before the day got in the way – and she meant it. We settled on hash browns and I had an English muffin with peanut butter and jam, piled high with thin sliced ham – and it was a good thing I hadn’t put on the dress coat Fiona had made for me – jam obeys no rules.

Mom was a bit sluggish after giving in to Fiona’s demands to eat, but we got her into the dress, and her hair done up.

“Oh, I almost forgot – the pearls. I haven’t been able to get them from the crate since we got here – I wanted to surprise your dad. Could you get them for me?” she asked, sitting there, trying to be calm.

I put a hand on her shoulder the way Jamie had with me this morning.

“Be right back.”
The pearls were around her neck, breaking up the rather large expanse of exposed skin above the dress, and I could suddenly see why Roger called my mom ‘swan’. And then it was my turn for the final primping. I attached

the brooch from Jamie to the upper chest on the left side of my coat and swapped it for my sweatshirt, and I decided to wear my hair down, but not so it obscured the pin with the Fraser crest.

“You two take a minute,” Fiona insisted, not knowing we’d said all there was to say, and then some, before arriving for breakfast.

“I’m gonna throw on my dress and drag a comb through my hair. Keep an ear out for the hired car.”

And then we were on our way.

Jamie stood poised, just steps from the church Claire had reluctantly married him in in 1743. This time, they both wanted this union, and were both in love – desperately in love. Getting them into separate rooms as the wedding loomed was near impossible. Actually finding that their original wedding date was available at this church confirmed the idea that they would again wed in this place. It was pure chance that Claire found this church again. A late night ‘Googling’ shortly after his proposal had brought her to the webpage, and when she clicked ‘show image’, she couldn’t believe her eyes. Her jaw chattered, but her fingers automatically typed the date of her marriage to Jamie into the box titled ‘open dates’. She snatched up the laptop and took off through the rooms, finally finding Jamie out-dueling himself at a game of pool. Her cheeks were blazing as she set the computer on the felt.

“You won’t believe this,” she assured him as she directed his attention to the computer screen.

“Aye? What is it, then?”
“It’s available,” she said cryptically, getting just a raised eyebrow from her betrothed.

“The church is available on our anniversary.”

He looked at the picture and felt a wave go over him. Every feeling from that day insisted on making an appearance, trickling down his spine. Fear, pride, desire, nervousness – all swept him in a flash and he bent forward

and grabbed the rail of the pool table.

“Christ,” he muttered, his knees barely under him.

His heart was pounding as he remembered the sight of her – and the way she looked at him brightly adorned in his highland finery. He felt the pit in his stomach that had come with her saying ‘I can’t marry you’, and the

actual weakness of his knees when they spoke their vows. And the feel of their bound wrists – the first of many touches their marriage would allow, and the love he was not yet ready to reveal to her.

“I remember it more through your memories than my own, but what I do remember makes me love you all the more,” she emotionally recalled, surprised to see a tear dangling from the end of his nose as he looked up from

the screen.

“Available, ye say?” he croaked.

“Will you take my hand again in the same place that made you mine for all time?” she asked.

“As you wish,” he whispered, and bowed courtly.

It was booked before he’d stood.

And now he stood outside that church again, ready to share another life with Claire, for however
long that would be.

“Jamie?” Roger said with some concern, “You OK?”

Jamie came out of his trance and shifted the smile up one side of his face yet again.

“Aye, just remembering.”

“Of course you are – this is where it all began for you, is it not?”

“Aye, taking Claire as my wife gave me a life I never would have had – I might not be here now if our paths had never crossed, and were I not looking to find her again, I’d have long ago lost the will to live.”

Roger patted Jamie on the back.

“She’ll be here soon enough – would you like to meet my sons-in-law? The family encompasses a good many clans now, and I’m proud to add Fraser and MacLeod. Come, I’ll keep you distracted ’til she arrives.”

Roger directed Jamie toward the throng of people who were milling about outside the church. It would be quite crowded once they all entered the church, and there was no way to make that many small children stay calm or sit still for a long time, so rather than try to shove them all inside until such a time as everyone had arrived, nearly everybody was satisfied to be outside, children running about (within reason). As they walked into the group, two other tartan-clad men approached, and Jamie scanned each one, identifying the plaid patterns, one predominantly dark blue and dark green, the other appearing to be the faded cousin of the first. Jamie smiled as they approached, liking the thought that there were so many kilted men attending his wedding.
“Duncan Strachan,” one man introduced himself, reaching out to shake Jamie’s hand. “I hear that through you Joe MacLeod is part of the family by blood. He’s truly one of us, and as a musician, it makes me proud to know my children share a heritage so rich.”

Jamie gladly clasped his hand and patted him on the back of the shoulder.

“Aye, too bad the music genes skipped me.”

“But Joe told me you sang.”

“Technically true, but it was a punk band – I more yelled and screamed – not musically in the least.”

“Well, pleasure to meet you none-the-less. I better get back to Abby – we’ve got the three young ins with us this day, and I’ve left her to fend for herself long enough for resentment to set in.”

He got a pat on the back from his brother-in-law as he retreated.

“Robby Ferguson, pleasure,” he said as he shook Jamie’s hand. “I can’t sing a note, myself – doesn’t go over too well with this crowd,” he said, leaning in, “but they decided to keep me anyway,” he added with a wry smile.

“Hey, old man, looks like we’re about to get this show on the road,” Joe MacLeod hooted as he came over and gave Jamie a hug. “I believe that long black car holds your bride to be.”

“You made it, survived the wait,” Roger expressed joyfully, smiling broadly at Jamie until he shot back a smirk and turned to face the driveway, watching as the car drew closer, along with its precious cargo…his family.

~~~~~

I had the dress specially made because I knew Jamie would be breathtaking in his kilt, and I wanted to be half as beautiful as he was. The feel as the corset was tightened behind me squeezed the butterflies that had been
flittering all week. This was not a day to be sick, though. There was no reason, after all, for me to be retching nervously. We’d been married – technically still were, if you could make anyone believe the truth of it, and I

wanted very much to be married to Jamie again. Brianna helped me out of the limo – it had been a while since I’d dealt with such voluminous skirts. And it was a good thing she was there! Jamie broke into a broad grin that

enchanted me so deeply that my feet tangled on each other, and she had to catch me. Unfortunately, she grabbed me tight around the middle, and those damned butterflies would have no more of it.

“Let go, I need to be sick,” was all I managed, lunging for a stone light pillar, hanging on for dear life as it all came up.

Hanging like a damp rag flung with great force, it was some time before I was up to moving. I knew I heard Jamie and Brianna talking, but it didn’t sound like words. Brianna cast a glance at Jamie. His look went from

concern to deep thought, and a smile flicked on and off.


Jamie raised his head, and an eyebrow, his lips pushed forward in thought.

“Well, it’s just, you see, there’s only one other time I’ve seen your mother sick like this, and it was when,” he couldn’t fight a smile just now. “Well, she’s not one to get sick, except…”

“Except?” Brianna asked.

“Except…when she’s with child.”

Jamie dragged one toe back and forth in the dirt, watching his own foot, hands clasped behind his back, waiting to see what his daughter might say. Brianna was slowly translating his words into understanding. Suddenly, her eyes went round and she grabbed Jamie by the sleeve.
“You…you can’t mean…You’ve knocked up my mom?”

It came out louder than expected, all eyes turning to Brianna except Claire, whose only response came as she knotted her fists in the material of her skirt.

“Aye, I think I may have,” Jamie replied, sheepish grin flashing on and off between looks of extreme worry.

~~~~~

Everyone slowly filtered into the church, buzzing with conversation about what they thought they had just heard. Fiona went in ahead, trying to keep speculation from bubbling over, and keep the wedding on track. Brianna let Claire lean on her while she found her feet and her breath again.

“Is he right?” Bree mumbled to her mother. “Is it possible?”

Claire just looked at her daughter for a moment, finally saying, “I don’t know.”

Jamie nervously paced, his kilt swishing back and forth as he turned. He held the hilt of his sword in one hand, and the hilt of his dirk in the other, squeezing them like unyielding stress balls until Roger stopped him by stepping in his path right after one of his abrupt turns and grabbing him by the upper arms.

“Everyone’s in place, and no matter the truth, you are here to marry Claire today – and better that you do in case what you said is true.”

Jamie nodded at him and took in a deep breath. Brianna steered her mother over to Jamie and Roger, and finally let her stand on her own. Claire looked up at Jamie as he looked down into her eyes. They both looked haunted. Claire put her hands up, palms toward Jamie. He slowly slid his fingers through hers and brought his forehead down to meet hers.
“Fiona has saved us seats in the front. Go ahead, I’ll make sure of things on this end,” Roger imparted to Brianna.

She nodded and reluctantly headed into the church.

“Alright now,” Roger gently spoke.

Jamie and Claire shifted from face to face to side by side, and came to within steps of the entrance to the church. Roger stepped before them, getting a reassuring nod from each of them before he ducked into the church.

“Ready?” Jamie queried.

Claire flicked her eyes to the side and smiled shyly.

“It’s never mundane with you,” she exulted, taking a step forward.

~~~~~

The warm glow of the candles in the church helped my complexion seem far less green and ashen. I was glad I had asked about the lighting – on our tour, the buzz of mid last century’s fluorescent lights had made me feel a bit too much like Craigh na Dun had come to roost over my head. The candles had been good enough the first time, I saw no reason to add harsh shadows that would only further deepen the lines on my face. Although I was pretty sure Jamie was looking at me through the light of love. There was no hint he saw me any differently than the first time we stood here.

I gladly walked down the narrow aisle of the church, having to take several sideways steps to make it past those kilted men sitting in the aisle seats, admiring each man as I slipped by him. Jamie was holding my arm tightly,

making sure I kept my feet and that I didn’t get too far ahead of him. I saw Brianna sitting between Fiona and Cassidy MacLeod in the front row, and it made me smile. Father McBride seemed a bit distracted by the buzzing
vibe coming off those assembled. He was perhaps the only person here today who had not
overheard the conversation that took place outside, for he had been in the church preparing for the
wedding. But the father did his

bit flawlessly, and we were pronounced husband and wife.

I stopped Jamie as he leaned in for a kiss and whispered, “hold up a second,” I looked over my
shoulder and gave a slight nod.

Everyone in the church, including Jamie, looked shocked when Roger MacKenzie stood, pulled the
dagger from Jamie’s belt, and placed a shallow cut on each of our inner right wrists, then tying
them together with a length

of white linen. I surprised Jamie, again, by not only knowing the words, and the proper Gaelic
pronunciation of our second vows, but when I took the lead in saying them by telling Jamie to ‘say
the words after me’. I saw his
chest fill with pride, and as I got the very last of it correct, his smile blossomed, and he was already
leaning in for his deferred kiss.

I swear it took all his strength just then, not to lay me on the altar and let them view the
honeymoon, and I’m not so sure I would have minded this time. I did not plan on taking hours to
warm up, nor did I have to work up

the nerve. Tonight, I planned to take my husband to bed, and keep him there until morning.

~~~~~

Everyone was expecting us at the reception. It was basically a family function with almost no one
outside the MacKenzie family to be there, so Fiona had volunteered the manse, but Brianna had
found and booked the small

banquet room of a hotel to handle the reception, and take that one item off the list of things Fiona
would have to do for us. I’m sure it was beautifully decorated and inviting, but as Jamie and I were
getting into the limo, we

looked at each other, and decided the last thing we wished to be doing was spending the evening
with pleasant expressions painted on our faces.

“Bree,” I softly hummed, her head coming up.

“Would it be completely rude of us to not come?”
Her face fell at first, but I saw this wave of understanding wash over her. It wasn’t just that we wanted to start our honeymoon.

“I doubt anyone will ask me why you’ve begged off,” Brianna answered with an impish grin. “We’ll celebrate for you.”

I gave my girl a quick kiss and I saw a smile pass between her and Jamie.

~~~~~

“What have I missed now?” Fiona asked as she came upon Brianna watching the limo pull out of sight.

“They decided to skip the reception, but we are to enjoy ourselves for them,” Bree explained.

“Aye, I’m sure they have much to…” Fiona seemed to lose her words – a rare event, indeed.

“Yeah, I’m sure they do,” Bree joked.

“Will this leave you in need of a ride to your hotel?” Fiona asked.

“No, I just need to make it to the elevator at the end of the day, and remember my room number, but there are a couple of things I could use help with,” Bree warned.

“Anything, dear.”

~~~~~

A part of me pined for that sparse inn where we’d spent our first wedding night, but those feelings ebbed as I looked at the king size bed, and the bathroom with a whirlpool tub. Brianna had chosen our hotel, making sure
no one else knew where we would be. And she was sure NOT to book us into anyone’s ‘honeymoon suite’. It was just a luxurious room where nothing mattered but the two of us…and that damned figurative elephant.

I was sitting at the dressing table and couldn’t help but jump slightly when Jamie came in and closed the door behind him. I almost expected to see sword and dirk in his hand, but he had given the pair to Roger to protect

for the night, and for a historian’s chance of perusal. Few highland weapons of the era had survived in such good shape as Jamie kept his blades. I smiled at him, but his expression remained neutral, his stare seeming to

say ‘we have ways of making you talk’. His eyebrow lifted high, as if reading my thoughts, and not having a clue as to what I was talking about. I felt him walk up behind me as I fidgeted with my hands. I looked up into the

mirror and saw his desire to talk to me, and I knew this was not how either of us wanted to start our second marriage.

The ride from the church had been long enough for his exuberance to fade, and the events just before the wedding to invade. We nodded and smiled most of the trip, and I suddenly dreaded the moment we would be alone.

He held my hand, but he also held his tongue, and that made me nervous.

Now alone, though, Jamie went ahead and asked a question that would have been unspeakable and unnecessary on our first wedding night.

“Claire, are ye carrying my child?”

I felt my mouth open and my throat close.

“Very unlikely. I’m laying the blame on that abominable haggis at the rehearsal dinner!”

“Don’t go blaming the haggis – ye’ve always had a steel trap for a stomach. Ye know as well as I only one thing makes you that ill, and then is gone in the hour!”

“What do you want me to do? Have an emergency blood test? Confirm your suspicions? It won’t change anything!”
Jamie looked uneasy, almost sick with worry now. There was sad longing in his eyes – but he wasn’t looking at me so much as through me, seeing past flesh and bone, into the emptiness he felt was his fate. How was I to change the centuries of pain and guilt Jamie felt about childbirth? He’d lost both children and women to it, and nearly both at once where I was concerned. Medical advancements notwithstanding, there still was a danger inherent to the process. My age and previous history were no help. But then I thought of what this possible baby could do for Jamie. Perhaps I could teach him the joys of impending parenthood in a way he’d never been allowed. Could I take the sting of loss from his heart, and instead fill it with the light of innocence?

He stopped dead behind me, turned me on the stool, fawning, not knowing to stand or kneel or grab me or walk away. He chose to clamp his hands on my upper arms and bring his forehead to mine. Jamie crouched and slid his hands down my arms to hold my hands.

“Not change anything, Christ, Sassenach, it changes everything.”

He placed his head in my lap and exhaled warmly against my thighs, his hands at my hips.

“Mo nighean donn,” he deeply toned.

“It will be alright, Jamie. The two of us…three of us…having a baby in this century is not a death sentence.”

He raised his head and tried to smile, but he stared at my belly as the words coalesced in his mind.

“It doesna matter what century it is, nor what has come before – the same is still true – there is nothing I can do to help, and to be helpless…I die a little, each time, Sassenach. Each child I’ve lost, the women who’ve died because of my selfish needs – each one takes a piece of me, but, Faith, perhaps because she was the first, I canna think of her without seeing you, and my heart almost stops. I nearly lost you then. I’ve only just gotten ye back.”
“I’m not even sure,” I said, shaking my head, and before Jamie could interrupt I added, “Throwing up is not definitive proof, although in my case a rather strong indicator. But for tonight, nothing has changed. You are my husband…again, and I want you – in the bed, on the floor, hanging from the chandelier – heck I’ll even give the luggage stand a go if you think I won’t fall through the straps,” I added, trying to inject some levity into the serious turn our conversation had taken. He smiled in spite of his feelings.

“But it changes so much-” I brushed my fingers over his lips to stop him.

“Not tonight it doesn’t. It’s too soon to do anything, and too late to change anything.”

“It is possible, though, I could, as Brianna so nobly put it, have ‘knocked you up’?”

I was silent for a bit, wishing I had made a successful change of topic.

“Are ye still…with your courses?”

I scowled at Jamie, angry that he would ask – more angry that my honeymoon was being deferred for a virtual impossibility that was becoming all too possible. I stared longingly at him.

“Technically, but it’s been months – before I met up with you. I had no reason to believe – “

“So you’ve not been careful?”

“If you’re talking birth control, no, I didn’t think there was a need at my age! And if you will remember, we had sex five times in the first ten hours after we reunited, and we’ve been all over each other since then – I didn’t see you stopping to ask, or offering to use a condom. I wasn’t thinking about being careful. I was thinking about how wonderful it felt, how much I wanted you, how hard you get when I…”

I had placed one hand on Jamie’s thigh, inching it closer and closer to the edge of his kilt. He stood
abruptly, and turned away, taking a few steps toward the bed. His left hand went to his hip, his right pressed to his temple. Suddenly I was on my feet, coming up behind him, my hands sliding up under his kilt.

“Can we not deal with this tomorrow, and enjoy tonight. Oh, God, Jamie, it would be a sin to keep that from me.”

I slipped his kilt free from its belt, and it fell between us.

“I just got you back, Claire.”

“And it will take more than this to take me from you. Will you have me?” I asked, knowing it would evoke an experience that saw us nearly destroying each other with our want and need to claim each other.

He turned in my arms, hesitating as our eyes found each other.

“Yes. Yes, I’ll have you.”

He tore at the laces of my dress, only getting it loose, but it was enough to start with. He pulled me around him and threw me onto the bed. While he removed his shirt, I rucked my skirt up to reveal that while the dress may have looked vintage, there wasn’t so much as a shift to contend with. He began to shift his head toward my thighs, but I shook my head, intercepted his lips, and readjusted his aim.

“Oh,” I moaned, my back arching at the first moment of contact. He held me in that position, my back up off the bed. His grin grew the longer he kept me that way. He finally let me down, but shifted my hands to the headboard with a look that very clearly said ‘leave them there’. Jamie went back to work on the laces of the dress, suckling the freed breast and groping the one still trapped behind the fabric. Finally it all came loose, and he pulled it away, like he was slipping the shell off a lobster’s tail. There was a sudden increase in temperature as skin finally touched skin along our total lengths. I tickled his scalp with both hands – I had not been able to keep them on the headboard and out of the action. By Jamie’s reaction you would have thought I
had taken a whip to him, for he bucked hard, bound to possess me, fighting hard to forget everything except the knowledge he had of my body and how he could rouse it to a fever pitch, only to let off and do it again and again.

In the twenty years without Jamie, sex had been an occasional physical need, often with the best results being by my own hand. I had come to think my sex drive was waning, but it seems it was merely in neutral, waiting for the right chauffeur. Jamie knew how to take the curves, and could push me into overdrive. While I was scarcely a child the first time I had Jamie in my bed, and hardly a novice, since his return, my body had reached a new plateau in sexual pleasure. They say women reach their full sexuality after forty, and men in their late teens and early twenties. Well, Jamie was a perpetual twenty-six year old, at least in body, but he had lifetimes of knowledge and a few good years of hands on experience with my body. If ever there were a couple at a mutual sexual highpoint, we were it, and dammit if it wasn’t glorious.

~~~~~

“Hey, Bree,” Cassidy said as she came and sat next to Brianna at the reception.

“Hi,” Bree answered, face brightening considerably.

“Did I miss your mam and da already?”

Bree laughed.

“They skipped the whole thing.”

“Well, no wonder. Everyone still wants to know if it’s true.”

Bree shrugged her shoulders and put up her hands.
“I wouldn’t be surprised,” she revealed, “...Oh, my God, they might make me a big sister.”

Brianna looked horrified as she thought about it. Cassidy put a hand on Bree’s shoulder.

“I can get you through that, too,” Cassidy reassured her.

~~~~~

I felt like a luxuriating mermaid, settled into the whirlpool tub, about to unfurl my tail above the gold-plated fixtures. I heard the door open and close, and Jamie calling, “It’s only me,” as he walked across the room. A few seconds later he was at the bathroom door, peering around the corner at me.

“Feeling better?” he asked, having heard my early morning emptying about an hour ago.

“Much,” I replied.

“Would you like to join me in here?” I asked, swishing my backside to and fro. “It’s the only place on last night’s list we didn’t get to, and I think the strap marks have finally faded,” I half-joked, trying to look over my shoulder.

“We’ll have to pay for the luggage stand, ye know?”

“Oh, Aye,” I answered, smiling broadly. “I don’t think we can break the tub; we might flood the room, though.”

He didn’t seem completely opposed to the thought.

“Why did you go out?” I asked.
“Oh, there was a message – the phone was blinking at me so as I couldn’a ignore it. Seems those who attended the reception enjoyed themselves, and our lass saved ye the top tier of the cake – Brianna was upset that Roger’s youngest son was not able to get there. The lass was really lookin’ forward to meetin’ ‘im for some reason. She was really just checkin’ up on us – well, on you, honestly, and she said she’d be sending something in the morning you might be needin’.”

Jamie reached behind himself and brought forth a big box of saltine crackers.

“Brianna, you little imp,” I murmured.

Jamie smirked, obviously thinking it was funny, too – two peas in a pod when it came to that quirky sense of humor. I noticed Jamie was only wearing his shirt, and wondered if he’d had the audacity to go down to the front desk like that. He must have taken the expression of my daydream image as a come-hither invitation because I felt the water level begin to rise, and he rolled me on top of him as he sank into the warm water. We did splash several inches of water over the edge, as it was. We had made good use of the room last night, able to shed the possibility of parenthood once we were not thinking with our brains any longer.

Jamie gently touched me over the navel. I said, “Not yet,” and moved his hand to the small of my back, slowly undulating over him until resistance was futile. We lingered in the water, the mermaid and the silkie. At least he didn’t get seasick in the bath, but the water was getting cool, and I was pruning in an unattractive fashion.

~~~~~

“She wants to meet him because they have similar interests,” I started saying, lounging on the bed in a fluffy robe Jamie had wrapped me in.

“Hmm?” he asked, tilting his head, coming to sit on the bed with me, and pulling his left leg up as he turned toward me. His robe split open too high up his thigh and I felt momentarily breathless.
“Ah, Roger’s youngest,” I got started finally, “– he does restoration construction. She wanted to ask him about fixing the tower at Lallybroch – it’s right up his alley.”

“Oh. There wouldn’a be anything else to it, then?”

“What are you implying?”

“Well, she’s of an age to marry herself, and a nice Scottish lad wouldna be the worst thing in the world.”

“A nice Scottish lad who happens to be her own cousin?”

“He’s far enough removed from Dougal – I’d be more leery of Gellis’s blood in his line.”

“Don’t remind me. Ugh, it’s hard to believe such nice people descend from those two! Now don’t get me wrong, your uncle was quite seductive in his own right – he tried more than once to get me to his bed, or wherever –
even on our wedding night he encouraged me to try ‘other pleasures’ with very little doubt about what he meant.”

“Did he now? Good thing I didna know at the time. When was this, then?”

“I was still shaking off the effects of his offer when you dropped the pearls around my neck.”

Jamie leaned over looking at the bedside table where his mother’s pearls sat in a loop. He reached his hand out to skim along the bumps, his face telling me how glad he was that I’d worn them today, and then leaned over me and looked down in my face, his hands pressed against mine on the bed.

“That was a revelation to me at the time, that sex could be that gentle, yet make ye feel so…like ye owned the world, because it was sittin’ in ye’re lap.”

I chuckled and he leaned in and kissed me softly. The tears were unexpected, but I couldn’t seem to
fight them. His weight landed against me, just holding me until the tears subsided. And then my stomach growled – long and loud, and we both broke out laughing.

“Shall we get dressed for lunch, or order room service?”

~~~~~~

Turns out we had reservations for a late lunch – a surprise set up by Brianna that she’d even managed to keep from me! A driver arrived, and produced an invitation on heavy card stock. I knew in an instant my daughter had written the text, because step one read, “Put on some damn clothes!”

Jamie slipped on his slim-fitting blue jeans with the cuffs turned up, black tee-shirt and weathered leather jacket – he’d seen that look come into style at least three times, and he looked damn good in it. I went with a few more layers, not having been born with Jamie’s internal furnace, nor his imperviousness to the cold. Fleece leggings were a must, and a turtleneck, and a dress over that. Hooded jacket, scarf and fur-lined boots finished me off, and had Jamie laughing.

We once more approached the door of our room, and found the driver still waiting.

“Shall we go?” Jamie said with a polite tilt of his head.

We were escorted to an inconspicuous car, and watched to see where our daughter would send us, knowing us as she did. After a while, I nestled back against Jamie’s chest, and was lulled to sleep with a combination of his warmth and the thrumming of the engine. It was a quick squeeze on my arm that brought me awake as Jamie was suddenly drawn to attention. He sucked in a breath, and we were still on the highway.

“What?”
“She’s sent us home – Lallybroch,” he gulped.

It was a long thirty minutes before we pulled into the yard, the house standing tall and white before us. Memories washed over both of us. I could almost see Jenny coming out the door, smiling and approaching me with open arms. I suddenly missed her more than words could say. When we visited a few days ago I had no inkling of her presence, but today it was everywhere. I knew Jamie saw her too, but he also saw Ian and the children, and so many memories I was not a part of. So many years that should have been ours together. He took my hands as we both shook off the ghosts and headed into the house. An envelope sat propped on the old table in the kitchen among the settings for two. Jamie grabbed the envelope and opened the note. He waved a hand at one chair and got me to sit before beginning to read Brianna’s words aloud.

“Dear Mom and Dad,” Jamie stopped and smiled at me. Brianna hadn’t called him that to his face yet, but that she would write the word warmed his heart.

“If I was able to pry you out of your bed, and get you here, then you are in for a treat. Your dinner will be served at your convenience, and should you find it to your liking, there is a room upstairs, and appropriate clothing waiting for both of you should you wish to spend the night. I hope what I’ve done here is a good thing. Jamie – I want you to make my mother happy, and I’m glad you’ve found us again.”

My hand was on my throat and tears in the corners of my eyes as he finished and tucked the note back under the flap of the envelope.

“She knows what buttons to push, doesn’t she?” I said, looking up into Jamie’s face as he stood and came behind my chair, reaching over and kissing me on the left temple.

Out of nowhere a pair of young women appeared dressed in corseted dresses and aprons.

“Shall we serve now?” one asked.

“Why not,” I replied, both asking Jamie and inviting the young women to bring us our meal.
I was way past hungry by now, and it smelled sumptuous.

“Yes, of course,” Jamie nodded to the girls and took his seat at the table, across the corner from me.

We ate, and ate…and ate. I had a little bit of the wine that was served with each course, but drank mainly water. I knew that with drink in moderation I would not harm the fetus, that I wasn’t even sure was there, but I guess I had already gone into that ‘mother to be’ zone in my head. Jamie kept looking at me across the table, sometimes beaming, sometimes shy and blushing. I still couldn’t read him, but I knew he was happy.

“We had some good times at this table,” he finally said.

“Yes, we did,” I replied with a smile, some memories unfolding that he could see in my eyes.

“But, there is another room with the best memory of all - when you finally told me the main reason you married me- that you wanted me - you loved me, and still another room where you showed me how much you loved me until neither of us could move.”

“But I also believe that in that room, I told you how I could take pain myself, but could not bear to see anything happen to you. That I was glad, at that time, that ye thought you’d not be able to bear children, to me or any man. I am glad that was wrong, I’m glad for the existence of our daughter, and to be sure I am proud as a peacock that I could ‘knock you up’ at this age, but I have never been more frightened for ye.”

“I know, and it is truly the last thing I expected, and if it’s true, it’s like starting over. I just got Brianna raised. When you came back into my life I was thinking of lots of sex, and days where we didn’t have to get dressed or out of bed. But I’ve been thinking, if it is true, maybe it is a gift. We lost one child together, and we had one child apart – what if this is our second chance? What if we are finally allowed to have a child we both get to see grow? There is so much they can do now for difficult pregnancies and premature babies. I’m around it on a daily basis, Jamie. This time is full of real miracles.”
I reached for Jamie’s face and held his chin.

“As much as I cannot believe this is happening, what could fit the definition of ‘miracle’ more than the two of us?”

He reached across the table and massaged the base of my skull.

“I want to believe. I mean I look at my hand and my back, and my lifespan, and it is a miracle, but some scars will never heal, no matter how many lifetimes I live. But for you, I will try to put aside my fears, and accept the miracle.”

~~~~~

We dismissed our serving girls after the dessert, tipping them well for their discretion, and near invisibility. Jamie and I decided to spend the night. While things were a little rough around the edges, there was something about spending the night at Lallybroch that just felt right to the both of us. We followed the arrow signs that led us to our bedroom for the night. The fireplace had a note saying ‘light me’ and the bed had a sash across it resembling the kind of caution tape often used to define dangerous areas. I felt the hand of Brianna’s sense of humor once again.

Even with the fire blazing, it was cold in the room, so once we were settled under a thick pile of blankets neither of us considered getting out of the bed. Jamie even threw the covers over our heads.

“I doona need to see you to know where everything is located, Sassenach,” he purred as our arms twined around each other’s backs and shoulders.

“Nor do I,” I replied, bringing my legs around his waist.

Soon we were more than warm, and we slept well here at Lallybroch. Our first real home still felt
like home, and I couldn’t help but think about the first time we came here. I felt warmth in my belly as for the first time it
dawned on me...the first time Jamie got me pregnant must have been here at Lallybroch. You would think I would have realized that before, but so much happened between the time he got me with child and when I knew,

and I can’t help wonder, now, if the stress of his capture, torture, and desire to die were part of why I lost her. The medical knowledge in my brain tells me there were physical reasons Faith did not survive, but a darker,

more emotional space in my brain wonders if I traded our first child for the continued love and companionship I needed from Jamie. The doubts and darkness had disappeared by dawn, and I could hardly recall having any

conscious thoughts other than Faith was made here, and it left me with a smile.

~~~~~
“This is a long way out there,” Fiona commented as she drove Brianna to Lallybroch.

“I know,” Bree’s voice wavered back.

“Does it worry ye that I’m just dropping you off, then?” Fiona asked, hearing the shaky warble.

“No, I’m sure you’ve said something to him to the effect that he’d lose body parts if he did anything to me.”

Fiona smirked wildly.

“Och, you do know me – William is a fine man, but some of his choices…I like to make sure of him…and you are a verra pretty girl.”

Bree blushed as she sat there.

After a considerable silence, Fiona cast a glance over at her passenger.

“Doona worry about him. He tries to maintain a reputation about town, and we tease him about it, but he’s really a gentleman. In fact, his heart gets him in trouble – it’s so big – so like Roger.”

“Well, if he’s walking funny the next time you see him, I know how to apply a knee to an unwanted advance,” Bree said with a toothy grin and one raised eyebrow.

“Och, you,” Fiona hissed. “You two will do fine.”
“Alright dear,” Fiona said as Brianna got out of the car, “he’ll be here soon.”

Bree nodded assuredly, “I’ll just look about a bit – I’m sure I’ll hear his car.”

“Truck,” Fiona corrected, almost rolling her eyes.

Bree released a nervous laugh.

“Sorry to make you drive me out here – I’m just not comfortable driving on that side of the car – I don’t know how mom and Jamie can switch so easily.”

“No bother, dear, you know that. And your parents are rather busy, with one thing or another,” she said with an impish grin.

Brianna grinned in return.

“Thank-you, Fee…for everything…for setting this up. I think – hope - this will help me come to a decision.”

“I’m sure it will. If nothing else, I know my boy knows his business.”

Fiona finally drove away, leaving Brianna at Lallybroch on her own.

Bree unlocked the house, leaving the key and her small bag just inside the door. She’d been scribbling notes and scrawling pictures with ideas for an updated layout within the walls of the house since she went to her room after the reception, wondering if it would bother Jamie were she to change things around too much, knowing they must talk about such things if she did ultimately do the restoration. She began the walk to the tower, keeping her ears open in case she heard an approaching vehicle. She wanted a chance to look over things for herself before anyone offered her an opinion.
She circled the base, having to avoid scrubby bushes that dotted the landscape around the tower. She looked back down toward the house, but saw nothing, so she circled once more to the doorway and stepped inside.

~~~~~

Jamie had told her to be careful if she went into the tower, but that had been days ago and Brianna had only been half listening. The steps felt sturdy under her feet, so any worry had left her mind. Light streamed in from every little crack in the floors and walls. Brianna stopped to look at the view from the window on the third level. She pressed her elbows in the bottom of the opening and pushed her head outside, looking straight down at the door below. She could really see the lean to the tower from here, but that was something she was not going to correct – it was part of the historic charm, and colloquial name that must stay a part of her ancestral home.

Freakin’ hell – ancestral home that belonged to her father – how to wrap her mind around that little tidbit! Two centuries of history in only one generation of family.

Brianna was distracted by all she had learned in the preceding months, and especially since starting this winter break. She thought her parent’s wedding would be the big news of the fortnight. But Jamie had told her some things – some he meant to, some he did not. What a pedigree – her mother a time traveller, her father immortal, and the little bombshell that landed just before the wedding. She took a step toward the center of the circular space, hearing a growing creak of boards, and the crumbling of the crackers they had become as she fell through and kept falling until she landed hard at the ground level. The only thing she could move was her head, but her ears felt wet. Brianna tilted her gaze downward. There was a giant splinter of floor board protruding from her abdomen.

“Oh, God, I’m going to die.”

~~~~~

“It’s a wee bit cold for a swim, lass,” a voice calmly stated with a tinge of humor in it.
Brianna moaned and lifted her head slowly.

“What?” she groaned.

“Where am I?” She began pushing up on her arms, but quickly realized she was nude and dropped back down to the muddy ground beneath her.

“You wouldn’t happen to be Brianna Fraser, now would ye?”

Her look was bewildered. The last thing she remembered was being in the tower…and dying.

“Um,” she uttered, “Yes.”

He saw the confusion in her eyes.

“I’m William – William Wakefield MacKenzie – we Skyped last night. Did I get the date wrong? I thought we were going to go over some plans.”

“Right,” she answered, seeming to come out of her daze, “Um,” she repeated, furtively glancing about.

William began to shed his sweater, making Brianna gulp, but she sighed with relief when he handed it to her saying, “Here, lass.”

It covered her well from neck to mid-thighs, and once she had it on she looked at the man who had given it to her. He was tall and broad and dark haired, but familiar.

“Let’s get ye to the hoose, then. Can ye recall what happened?” he asked with concern.

“I…I don’t know. What I remember doesn’t make sense.”
William helped her up from her knees. Taking her hands and supporting her ascent. He was impressed with her height, and her build, and he smiled uneasily, hoping she couldn’t read his mind, but he got the distinct impression she was in there right now, rooting out all his secrets.

“I’m sorry,” Brianna offered as they made a slow turn toward the house, “This is not how I wanted to meet. I just don’t know what happened. I was in the tower – I think I fell, but…I must have hit my head or something, because I would swear my last thoughts were that… I was dead.”

She looked into William’s eyes. He was a little taken aback, but despite just meeting her face to face, he wished dearly to take the fear and confusion from her mind.

“It’s alright, lass. When we get to the hoose, perhaps a cuppa, or a nip if it’s to hand.”

They walked in silence until the house came into sight.

“Sorry to be so daft – I’ve had this odd feeling we’ve met before, and now I realize it’s your dad I’m thinking of. There’s a picture in the Manse, my mom pointed it out to me. She met your parents before I was born – I think she met you then as well.”

“Aye, I’ve heard the story many a time, but I was a wee lad yet, and I barely remember.”

“William?”

“Call me Wake, will ye? I know to respond to it far better than if you were to call me anything else!”

“Wake, then, I’m sure people tell you all the time you look like your father.”

“Aye, but I don’t mind – he’s always been a handsome buggar – could probably still pull a bird if he wanted.”
The last thing he wanted to do was let go of her, but once they reached the old house, Wake had no choice but to let go of her as he placed her in one of the kitchen chairs. Brianna’s elbows slumped onto the table top and she put her head down for a bit. She could hear a bit of bashing and clanging behind her, but didn’t have the energy to question it. Wake slipped a warm mug into her palms and helped her keep the hold on it while he got a few sips into her. At first she only felt the warmth of strong tea, but when the burn came to her throat, she blew a strong breath out through her mouth.

“What’s in that?” she coughed.

“Just a little whisky – got you your color back, probably warmed ye up a bit, too.”

She smiled warmly at Wake and drank some more. At least he didn’t think she was too young to drink, or was he trying to get her drunk? Brianna felt odd, but she didn’t think she was drunk on so little whisky. She felt…disconnected from time, like she wasn’t running at quite the right speed.

“Should we reschedule?” Wake asked, taking the mug from her before she could drop it.

“Um…just give me a few minutes,” she slowly slurred.

Bree blinked and shook her head.

“Hmm,” she hummed, trying to put the last few hours in some kind of order.

“Feeling better?” Wake inquired.

She looked into his eyes and they both froze. Brianna shivered when not just the image, but the feeling of being wrapped in his embrace came to her. Wake saw the quiver of her flesh. He got up and left the table, returning a moment later holding a blanket he’d found somewhere.
“Come here lass, I’ll get ye warm.”

He pulled her to her feet and swung the blanket around her, bringing her body tight to his. She was still too weak to fight, and it felt nice, and Brianna let out a sigh of contentment and went face down into his shoulder. As she warmed, Brianna felt more like herself, like her internal chronometer was resetting and she was coming up to speed. She turned her head ever so slightly to glance up the side of Wake’s face at close proximity. A tentative smile was playing with the side of his mouth and his cheek muscle couldn’t decide whether it wanted to be involved just yet. He was calm, warm and solid, and he was making her body tingle.

~~~~~

Brianna darted into her hotel and got to her room with a minimum of notice, no small feat for a tall, bedraggled redhead wearing only a borrowed sweater. She’d promised Wake she’d get the sweater back to him when he came to work on the North facing tower, a handshake promise on the deal.

“God, I need a shower,” she mumbled into the mirror of her bathroom.

As she pulled the sweater off, she took in a breath, Wake’s scent all over it. She shivered out of nowhere, and held the sweater to her chest. Thoughts of Wake made her smile, but then she flashed back to waking in the mill stream, and to the moments before, where she swore she felt herself die.

The restorative power she was hoping to draw out of a hot shower did not come. She sat in her robe and pulled her feet up on the bed. She’d promised not to use the cell phone except in an emergency, and she hoped her parents agreed that getting killed and coming back to life qualified.

“Mom?” she almost cried into the phone.
“What’s wrong, baby?” Claire answered, swept with fear.

“Can I come talk to you, and Jamie too? Something happened, and I need to talk about it.”

“Of course, Bree, whatever you need…Are you OK, though?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I need to talk to you two.”

“You know we’re here for you. Your dad and I will be waiting.”

Claire placed the phone tentatively down on the bed side table. Jamie simply raised an eyebrow and tilted his head at me.

“She wouldn’t go into details, but something has Brianna very troubled.”

“Should I get chocolate?” Jamie asked.

“By the tone of her voice, I think it’s hot cocoa all around.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Jamie seriously replied, and headed down to see if the kitchen could fulfill their wish.

~~~~~~

Brianna arrived while Jamie was tracking down cocoa. Claire swept her daughter into her arms.

“What’s happened?” she questioned, holding the girl much the way she held Jamie – chin lifted up to cradle her neck, dwarfed by Bree’s sheer size.

“I think I died, mom. I need to talk to Da – Jamie. I need to know what he felt when…he came back.”
Brianna was shaking now, and Claire maneuvered the girl to the bed, getting Bree’s head on her lap, and brushing her fingers through her daughter’s hair.

“It will be alright, sweetie,” Claire soothed.

She bent her head low over Brianna, rocking her ever so slightly. She wished dearly right then that she could speak those soothing Gaelic phrases Jamie used to make horses and women alike trust him and relax.

“Did something happen with William MacKenzie? I know you were meeting him today.”

“No…well…yes…but no – unless you want to count meeting him while I was stark naked.”

“Stark naked?” Jamie inflected, coming through the door in time to hear Brianna’s last two words, holding a tray with three thick white mugs on it.

He saw Brianna bolt from her mother’s lap and the bed in general, and put the tray down quickly, but carefully. He braced himself to receive her rushing form, and warmly embraced her as she enveloped him with her arms and began to cry.

“Mo chridhe,” he breathed, swept with emotion himself.

He looked at Claire over Brianna’s shoulder, eyes burning with pain and pride as the girl clung to him.

“What’s happened, now, lass? Tell me…Brianna,” he finally had the courage to address her by name.

The feeling in him was overwhelming. His daughter needed him, and he was there to give her the comfort she’d needed as a child, there to offer his reassurance, and feel reassured himself that he had something to offer.
his child, yet.

“\textquote“I think I died today,” she softly spoke.\textquote”

“A Dhia,” he whispered, holding her even tighter.

“I need to know…how does it feel? How do I know if…if I’m like you?”

Jamie pulled her back and looked her in the eye.

“Tell me what happened…everything.”

He guided her to an overstuffed chair and sat her down in it, crouching in front of her. He reached across the table where he set the tray and picked up one of the mugs.

“Here, have a few sips first,” he advised.

Her first sip was cautious, but she exhaled after swallowing and took several good drinks, visibly calmer. Jamie made a side-eyed glance at Claire and she shrugged. The charms of chocolate were rearing their head yet again.

She held the mug and let it warm her hands as she began her story.

“I was in the tower, taking note of what needed to be done. Wake – William MacKenzie – was coming to discuss my plans. I took one, maybe two steps off the stairs, and the floor collapsed. I fell…all the way to the bottom. I saw…a board…it was sticking up through me. I remember thinking I’m…I’m dying, and then I was floating. It was so quick…but…slow at the same time.”

Brianna paused for a moment to take another sip of the cocoa. Jamie sprang to his feet and spun
completely around in frustration.

“Oh, lass, did I not warn ye about the tower? Christ I…”

Claire put a hand on Jamie’s chest and shook her head at him with a ‘not the time’ expression. He crouched back down in front of her, Claire coming to stand behind him.

“I know you warned me. I remembered your words as I fell, but it was too late.”

Claire took Brianna’s mug from her hand as she saw Jamie grab for his daughter. He pulled her tight to him.

“Is there no end to it? Must I always find myself so close to losing what I love the most?”

“I’m sorry,” Brianna wept in his ear.

The pair of them clung and cried for some time, Claire helplessly watching, hearing Jamie’s words of several nights ago. “I die a little, each time, Sassenach…each one takes a piece of me.” Once the emotions settled a bit,

Brianna told us the rest of the story. Jamie and I had settled together on the floor at Bree’s feet and she had sucked up into the chair, knees to her chin, and I had returned her cocoa to her and Jamie had given me my mug.

I saw him take a sampling from his mug, but he’d put it aside after a single taste.

“So, that’s what happened? I came back in the mill stream?” Brianna inquired.

“Aye, ye did, lass…but thank God ye did,” Jamie answered.

“So…that’s it. I just come back to life? No side effects? Nothing changes?”

“Ah, no, I wouldna say that, precisely.”
He pushed Claire up from behind and slowly rose himself. Brianna’s brows knitted.

“What then?” she asked, starting to look a little green around the gills.

“Well, for me, there’s always been two things I could count on happening after a return. One, sometime in the first day, you get ill and have to…”

Brianna suddenly stood, clamped her hand over her mouth and dashed for the bathroom.

“Throw up,” Jamie murmured.

“You didn’t think to warn her a little sooner?” Claire inquired.

Jamie pulled her to his chest and exhaled deeply.

“I never thought to be explaining what it is like.”

Claire sighed in understanding, and rocked back and forth, getting Jamie to sway with her.

“So what’s the second ‘symptom’ of resurrection?” Claire asked with her head pressed to his chest.

Jamie’s arms tightened slightly and she heard him gulp.

“That bad?” she questioned, feeling his hesitation to talk about whatever the other effect might be.

“Well, not bad so much as hard to talk about…at least with the lass,” he whisper added to his statement.

Jamie placed his lips right to Claire’s ear.
“The other thing it does is…it makes you unbearably horny.”

Claire pulled her head back so quickly her neck cricked. She stared at Jamie, her mouth a bit open. He nodded slowly, reaffirming what he meant. His eyes were quite round in explanation.


“Laugh if you want, but it’s a level of hell whose equal I’ve never met. Your body is in business for itself – kinda like how I feel when I’m away from you too long, Sassenach. But at least now I have you to come back to – feelin that way and having no outlet, save a bit of self-abuse…well, it can be a serious problem.”

They turned out of each other’s arms as they heard Brianna return from the bathroom. She was dabbing at her face with a washcloth and looked quite ill indeed. Her parent’s moved toward her and she tilted her head on Jamie’s shoulder when he came into range.

“It’s usually only the once, but it’s enough, lass, to be sure.”

He felt her nod on his shoulder.

“So what’s the other effect?” Bree monotoned.

Jamie and Claire exchanged glances.

“I think you better tell her,” Claire encouraged.

“Um,” Jamie hummed, “Well, it’s just that…something about the process…well, it just – it invigorates one’s libido,” he carefully phrased, rocking back on his heels.

Brianna and Claire both said, “What?” and Bree leaned back to look in his face.
“It makes you all-fired horny – ye want it all the time – sometimes for days.”

The look on Brianna’s face was all too familiar to Claire. It was the one she’d seen when the girl had caught her and Jamie in bed the first time – totally shocked and overwhelmed. Bree blindly walked to the bed and sat down.

“Oh, wow,” she exhaled, hoping her face wasn’t showing every thought just now. Claire followed her and sat by her side, taking Bree’s hands in hers.

“Is that why I felt so attracted to Wake?”

She looked up at Jamie, hoping he had an answer. After a few moments contemplation he spoke.

“I canna tell you for sure. Could be, or could be ye’re attracted to the fella for the normal reasons, but I wouldna rush into anything just now.”

~~~~~

Bree was able to return to her hotel after staying with us for several hours of reassurance and a hot meal.

I had been anticipating a normal honeymoon this time with Jamie, but it was turning out to be anything but normal. So far we’d had to discuss an unexpected pregnancy, and all of its ramifications, and then deal with the death and resurrection of our daughter. The emotional roller-coaster just kept making circuit after circuit.

After seeing Brianna off, I turned to see Jamie sitting on the bed, his head deeply cradled in his arms, completely bent over. He was rocking forward and back, almost masking the heaving of his shoulders.

“Jamie?” I whispered as I lightly touched him, “She’s alright…Brianna is fine.”
“I know,” he wept, “She let me hold her. She was in my arms,” he said as he unfolded and held his arms out within his view, like the feeling of her touch was still tangible, and he was looking to see if there were visible signs as well.

“I held my daughter – for the first time,” he said, overwhelmed with emotion.

“You said it would happen – remember?” I reminded him, thinking of his prophetic statement of only the week before.

“I know, but…” Jamie sucked in a deep breath and attempted to smile, “I wanted to pull her up into my arms like a bairn…I wanted a lifetime of her embraces…I can only pray it continues - I just hope it wasna just because…of what happened.”

“I think ‘what happened’ this time was that turning point you saw for her. Bree hasn’t been that open since before the attack, and while she’s been growing by leaps and bounds since knowing you…”

I took Jamie’s face into my hands. “I felt a change in her too.”

He pulled me into his arms and one hand quietly traveled to my abdomen. His palm was warm and reassuring against me. I knew once again being married to Jamie would be a source of high emotions, these just weren’t the emotions I’d been counting on.

~~~~~

“I don’t know why, but I headed down to the old mill – it’s gotta be a quarter of a mile or so from the house, but I felt drawn to check it out. Well, the closer I get, I see a form lying on the bank of the mill stream, and as I get closer, I realize, there’s a person – a naked person – an absolute goddess of a woman – but she’s damp and starting to shiver a bit - and it turns out it’s this girl, well woman – Brianna Fraser – the one I’m there to meet
“Brianna – she was alright, wasn’t she?…you didn’t do anything?” Jem accused, tilting his head and raising an eyebrow.

“What do ye take me for?…alright, yes, I wanted her – but I would never take advantage like that.”

“Then what did ye do?”

“I gave the girl my sweater and walked her to the house. It must take hell of a lot to faze her – she still wanted to talk about the renovations! We’ve got a handshake deal – if she decides to fix the place up, she wants me to handle the day to day contractor duties until she can take over the job, and she’ll need me to rebuild the tower and for my knowledge of local regulations throughout,” he relayed to his brother, clearly none too upset at the prospect of being around Brianna Fraser, working closely for months, should it come to pass.

“Oh, hey Mam,” Wake greeted as Fiona came into the kitchen, “Could you make a batch of your soup?”

“Are ye feeling under the weather?” Fiona asked, reaching out to test the temperature of his forehead.

“It’s not for me. It’s for Brianna Fraser. She’s rescheduled our rescheduled meeting three straight days now, and I think your soup might help her recover from her chill.”

“What’s happened? Why would the lass have a chill? William Wakefield MacKenzie what have you done to that girl?”

“It wasna me who did anything. Och, why does everyone think I’ve done something to her? I found her, stark naked, on the bank of the mill stream at Lallybroch. She canna even remember how she got there, just something about being in the tower, maybe hitting her head. Why she was naked, God only knows.”
Fiona looked a bit perplexed, but began to nod as the truth of what she knew settled in. She set to making a pot of soup straight away.


Brianna woke with a start. Her heart was pounding, her cheeks felt red hot, and the throbbing that gripped her nether regions just wouldn’t stop.

“Gahhh, not another one,” she exploded, pounding her fists down on the bed.

The erotic dreams had been coming to her every night since she woke in the mill stream, and each one starred Wake MacKenzie, or at least Bree thought it was always him. There were always green eyes scanning over her body like they were making a copy of her.

“I can’t take much more of this,” Brianna spoke to herself.

It was morning, just barely, but Brianna decided there was no reason to go back to bed, only to fall into another dream that left her hot and bothered. She was thankful for the water pressure at the hotel, using the pulsing shower to, at least temporarily, relieve her body of the second symptom of her recent resurrection. She had been putting off another face to face meeting with Wake for three days now, claiming she wasn’t feeling well, but in reality afraid she might roll over in the front yard of Lallybroch like a cat in heat, and beg him to have sex with her until the need subsided.

She had just finished dressing when there was a knock on her door. She sucked in a breath, scared to death that Wake MacKenzie was standing in that hallway.

“Brianna, dear?” she heard the voice say.

She sighed with relief. It was Fiona. Bree opened the door wide enough to stick her head out.
“Are you alone?” Brianna asked.

“It’s just me.”

Brianna opened the door enough to let her in, seeing that she was carrying a large basket.

“Wake said you’d not been feelin’ well, so I made you a batch of my cure-all soup.”

“It’s not a soup kind of ailment,” Brianna confided.

“Oh?” Fiona questioned. “What’s troubling you, lass?”

Brianna hesitated, but figured that next to her parents, Roger and Fiona knew the most about her situation as possible. She let Fiona set them each up with a bowl of her soup while she unburdened herself as much as possible.

“How much do you know about my dad’s…longevity?”

“Just what he and your mother have told us.”

“Do you believe…it?”

“My dear, if we believe your mother travelled through time, we have no reason to doubt your father’s side of the story either. Claire is sure she has the same man back, and there’s only one way for that to be happening.”

Brianna shot off a slightly scared smile and nodded at the reassurance. She leaned forward from her perch on the end of the bed.

“Did he ever tell you about…side effects? From his returns, I mean?”
“I don’t think so.”

“Well, there are a couple…Fee… I died three days ago, and woke up below the mill. That’s why Wake found me like he did…and that’s why I’ve…been afraid to see him since. I’m not really sick, but the side effects, well one of them, really. I don’t trust myself to be around him.”

Fiona’s eyes were wide and curious.

“This ‘side effect’, as ye call it – do ye become violent?”

Brianna’s face went crimson, and Fiona picked up a vibe from her expression.

“So…ye’re attracted to my baby boy, then?”

Brianna gulped.

“I wish I knew. I don’t know if it’s him, or just…oh, Fee, I don’t even know what end is up right now. Wake was so nice when he found me, and it is so sweet of him to get you to come, but we’ve just met, and I can’t be meeting him for only the second time starting off with telling him, ‘by the way, I’ve just come back from the dead, and one of the side effects is extreme horniness, so please excuse me if I try to shag you every ten minutes.’ I can’t face him like this!”

Try as she might, Fiona could not resist laughing.

“You poor dear, no, you canna go near him like that. Did Jamie let you know how long these side effects would be in force?”

“He doesn’t know for sure. A few days, and I can only pray by a few he means three or less, because I can’t survive much longer. I’m afraid to leave this room.”
Fiona sat with Brianna as she finished her bowl of soup, commiserating with the young Fraser over her predicament.

“Are ye headed to Paris with your parents, then?”

“For a couple of days, then I’ll be heading home – back to Boston,” she altered her words in response to the look Fee gave her. “I know, Scotland is home, technically, but I’ve lived in Boston so long, I’m not sure what it would be like to live anywhere else anymore.”

“You’re a Scottish lass, and Scotland would be glad to have ye back.”

Bree smiled.

“True as that may be, I have classes to get back to. The new semester is about to start…”

“Well, I am sorry you and your parents won’t be staying through Christmas, but under the circumstances, I can see why you’d not want to be with us – not chance running into Wake the way you’re feeling.”

“I almost forgot Christmas was this week,” Bree responded with a shake of her head, “So much has happened – I would have…stayed for Christmas…but,” Bree took in an uneasy breath.

Fiona reached out and placed her hand on Bree’s wrist, nodding.

“In this case, better safe than sorry – but I do understand you’re coming back to us – to rebuild Lallybroch?”

“Oh, oh yeah. I’m pretty sure, anyway. I’ve been working on ideas non-stop, well, almost,” she shrugged.
“You’re allowed to think about yourself after what you’ve been through,” Fiona stipulated.

Brianna nodded, her visage looking introspective.

Fee gathered up her picnic set and was set to leave when Bree jumped up suddenly.

“Wait a minute,” she told Fee as she took several long, quick strides into the bathroom. She took the sweater Wake had covered her in off the hook and caressed it in her hands. She pulled it in tight and drew a deep breath through the neckband. It was exactly the way Wake smelled when she’d been in his arms at Lallybroch. A wave of erotic thoughts had her stifling herself by shoving the sweater into her face even tighter until she could function again.

“This is Wake’s sweater, could you make sure it gets back to him?” Brianna asked as she came back into the bedroom where Fiona was waiting.

“Sure,” Fee said with a bit of a smirk.

When she took the sweater from Bree’s hands, Bree took up the pad of hotel stationery and began jotting a few things down.

“This is my email, my Skype, and my brick and mortar address – could you…give him those as well? I never got to know all of what he thought about Lallybroch, and what it would take to…bring it back to life.”

“Of course, dear,” Fee replied, getting the feeling that wasn’t the only reason Brianna Fraser wanted Wake to have all her contact information.

Bree spontaneously hugged Fiona.

“I think the time here has been good for you,” Fiona expressed. “Compared to the day ye came...
through the door, it’s like you’re a brand new person, open to the possibilities life is beginning to present ye…” Fiona

hesitated, realizing what she was saying, and how Brianna might interpret it so soon after her life and death experience.

Bree helped Fiona get out the door before she murmured to herself, “Brand new person… Hopefully a braver one.”

~~~~~~

We gathered for a farewell lunch at Roger and Fiona’s, Brianna, Jamie and I having checked out of our hotels and brought our luggage with us back to the manse. Jamie inventoried what was to be shipped back to Boston,

making sure everything that was meant to come back actually did. I watched as Jamie lovingly nestled the box with the Scotch pearls into its niche in the crate, clearly quite happy that I’d worn them for the wedding, even if more pressing concerns were clouding his happiness.

After we ate, Brianna made her father immeasurably happy. We gathered in the study for one last talk before Jamie and I headed to the train station for our trip to Paris to continue our honeymoon. I could see that Brianna was brooding a bit, clearly apprehensive, but also clearly wanting to say something. In a lull, I saw her take a deep breath and sit up straight.

“I’m going to restore Lallybroch,” she said in a shaky voice. “When I finish my classes, I’m coming back here, and restoring my ancestral home,” she said, confidence growing with each word.

I watched as Jamie wrapped his hands around Bree’s upper arms and pulled her off the couch. He held her like that, at arm’s length, studying her eyes until he was sure he would not be rebuffed. He pulled her in tight, one arm diagonal-ing around her back, the other hand gently cradling her head.

“Brianna, mo nighean, mo chridhe.”
“I love you,” I heard her say.

Jamie sucked in a breath and stifled a sob.

“As do I, more than I ever knew was possible.”

There wasn’t a dry eye in the room. Jamie wouldn’t break contact with her, holding her to his side even after they’d sat back on the couch. I settled in on the arm of the couch, sitting just above them, my arm draped across his shoulders. Jamie pulled me down on top of him and wrapped the three of us close together. He spontaneously kissed me on the lips, then planted one on Brianna’s temple.

~~~~~

It was a lovely evening, the eve before Christmas Eve. By morning we’d be in Paris, a city of many memories for Jamie and me. Roger drove us to the train station in our rented SUV, Fiona trailing him in her car so he could get home. He pulled up to the curb while we unloaded our luggage, leaving Jamie, Brianna and me on the sidewalk when he drove off to return the vehicle. Bree carried my suitcase into the station. We waited for Roger and Fiona to find us before we boarded the train.

I hugged Fiona and Roger, and smiled as I saw Jamie do the same. I could tell they were already as fond of Jamie as they had been of me all these years.

To my surprise, Brianna turned and gave a quick hug to Fiona, and had no problem letting Roger hold her a bit longer.

“Glad you’re back to your old self,” he professed, Brianna nodding with a shy smile.

“New self,” she corrected, leaning back in to hold him tight for a second time.

“Bree?” I questioned, “Why are you hugging them? We’re the ones who are leaving,” I said,
sweeping my hand in Jamie’s direction.

“I’m coming with you,” she revealed. I turned quickly to look in Jamie’s eyes, both of us taken aback, both of us thinking the same thing – we have to tell her about Faith.

~~~~~
Paris

Jamie and I kept shooting glances at each other while Paris kept getting closer. Bree had surprised us with her intentions to travel with us as far as Paris, and then fly home from there. Originally, she was going to spend the holidays back at the manse.

Brianna caught me giving her a worried look.

“I’m sorry – I know you thought you’d have this part of your honeymoon to yourselves, but I just couldn’t stay at the manse right now. I was afraid of running into Wake.”

“I understand,” I toned, taking her hand in mine. “Are you…still feeling…”

“No, it finally passed, but, I don’t want to chance it, and do something I’d regret.”

Bree pulled one knee up and wrapped her arms around it.

“I feel so upside down right now.”

I leaned my head against hers.

“I know what you mean,” I concurred.

~~~

“How come we never visited Paris before?” Brianna asked her mother as they emerged from the train station.
“I guess I never thought of it…I…we spent some time in Paris,” Claire confessed.

“Aye, we did…those were…dark times,” Jamie struggled to give voice to.

Bree looked sympathetically at Jamie, hearing the tone of his voice and his hesitation. She turned and wrapped her arms around him. Jamie closed his eyes, almost shaking, as he let out a sigh, so glad for this new stage in his relationship with Brianna.

“Was it during the French Revolution?” she asked as she started to pull back.

“Och, no, some time before that, but war was involved – stopping one…but we failed in our task, and lost so much in the process.”

“Perhaps we should go some place more private,” Claire suggested, “There’s something…important we need to tell you now that we’re here.”

“Mom?” she questioned, giving her an odd look.

“Your mam is right,” Jamie cautioned.

~~~~~

Our taxi sped along, and all the lights of Paris were a blur. Even though Bree had booked her own room, we went together to the room that Jamie and I were to share here. One week in Paris. One week to visit Faith’s grave, and remember Mother Hildegard and all the Boutons. One week to retrace all the steps and missteps of our failed attempt to stop the end of Highland culture. Our lives would have been so different…

“Mom?” Brianna directed at me, bringing me back to the present, although not completely.

Jamie pulled me back onto the bed, fully supporting me.
“I’m here…tell her,” he urged.

Brianna was getting worried. I could see it in her eyes.

“We came to Paris to escape, recover, and find each other again, but we almost lost each other instead. Jamie was physically and emotionally wounded after a brutal imprisonment, and I…I had just found out I was pregnant.”

“Pregnant with me?” Bree asked.

“No, before you.”

~~~~~

Brianna sat motionless, staring straight ahead. I hated dropping this kind of news on her so soon after her ordeal, but the main reason Jamie and I returned to Paris was to visit Faith’s grave, and I had a feeling that Bree was in need of clinging to us, and would be quite upset if Jamie and I were to simply disappear for several hours. Odds were good that Bree would want to stay with us, and I lacked the strength or will to tell her anything but the truth.

“You had a baby before me?” Brianna queried, dropping her hands into her lap.

“She - ” I began.

“I had a sister?” Bree interrupted.

“She never took a breath…I miscarried…because of…”

“Because of me,” Jamie replied, hanging his head. “I insisted on fighting a duel, hoping to extract
some satisfaction in killing the man who broke my spirit. Despite your mam’s protestations, and a
promise I had made, I
engaged in revenge, and I paid for it with the life of our child.”

I proceeded to tell Brianna about my near death experience at L’Hopital des Anges; how Master
Raymond had purged my body of illness, and how Mother Hildegard and Louise de Rohan had
done their best to purge the
anguish and anger my heart and brain harbored after the loss of my baby. Jamie explained he’d
been imprisoned yet again after the duel, as it was illegal to do so in Paris at the time; and how
he’d not been there to comfort
me; how only through our joint strength were we able to bear our loss.

Brianna took it all in, barely reacting through our revelations, her stoicism at an all-time high, but I
think she was in shock. Each time she came to terms with something we revealed, it was merely an
opening act for the
next bit of information she must absorb.

When we had told our daughter what Paris had taken from us, she stood, her mouth gaping, pacing
the length of the room. I stood and tried to hold her, but she shook me off, and Jamie steered me
away from her. He took
me out onto the balcony, and together we cried.

When we went back inside, instead of pacing, Brianna was sound asleep in the middle of the bed. I
don’t know if she had shut down or just worn herself out to the point of exhaustion, but she looked
peaceful, and neither
Jamie nor I could bring ourselves to wake her.

“You should join her,” Jamie encouraged, “I’ll sleep in the chair.”

“I’m sure we could fit three in that bed,” I offered, “I don’t know that I could sleep without you
anymore.”

“Ye can and ye will,” Jamie assured me. “You are just as exhausted as she is. I can see it in your
eyes,” he said, taking my chin in his hand.
He leaned in and gave me the sweetest kiss.

“I’ll get ye settled, all tucked up, and then find myself a corner.”

“Alright,” I agreed, “but don’t be surprised if you wake up to find me curled up on your chest,” I half-teased.

Jamie helped me slide under the edge of the covers that were pinned under Brianna on the other side of the bed, and he held me and brushed his fingers through my hair until I did fall asleep.

~~~~~

I awoke several hours later, Brianna clinging to me, and Jamie no longer tucked in at my back. I raised my head enough to spy Jamie reclined in an overstuffed chair, his feet nearly over-shooting the ottoman. He slept quietly, occasionally twitching his shoulders and hands. I looked back at Bree. I had awakened to her on many mornings, more than once feeling Jamie’s presence. I brushed her hair back, seeing at once the little girl and the woman my child had grown into. She’d had to deal with so much recently, but I was sure she had the mettle to come through it all only slightly scathed.

“Christmas eve,” I whispered so as not to awaken Brianna.

“I used to have you sleep with me so you wouldn’t go looking for Father Christmas,” I continued to barely vocalize, stroking her hair back over and over.

“Not that you believed for all that long, but you were willing to play along with me, and I was thankful. I wanted to give you everything, and I think I did pretty well. The only thing I couldn’t give you was a father, but now you have him, too. And Jamie will make up for all the time you lost with him – you two have all the time in the world, now.”

~~~~~
“Sassenach,” Jamie whispered, getting Claire to open one eye.

“The lass and I are going for breakfast; she’s restless. We’ll bring you back something to eat,” he assured, stroking her cheek and giving her a kiss.

“Sleep as long as ye can; we’ve got an arduous day ahead.”

~~~~~

Brianna and I took to the streets of Paris in search of the perfect Parisian breakfast, and I hoped to get Bree to open up. I knew as well as her mam how much she must be hurting right now. She’s been so brave in facing everything that’s come into her life along with me, but I had seen a look in her eyes last night – she was nearing a breaking point.

I put an arm around Brianna’s shoulders, and she leaned her head on my shoulder as we walked. She exhaled heavily. I looked at her. Her eyes were sunken, and she looked on the verge of tears.

I led her into a patisserie and sat her at a tall, yet wee cast iron table.

“Bree?”

She looked up and nodded that she’d be OK, a slight smile flicked across her face for a moment. It had been a while, but my French was still sharp, and I didn’t raise as much as an eyebrow as seeming like a foreigner. I came back to the table with three croissants, one wrapped for Claire, and two cups of high quality hot chocolat – something Claire and I had drunk often in our Paris stay of the 1700’s.

“Here, lass, try this,” I offered.

She sniffed it cautiously and smiled, taking a sip.

“It’s like a slightly more liquid form of my brownie batter,” she informed me.
“Try dipping the croissant into it,” I suggested, settling in at the table.

She took a nibble of the plain croissant.

“That’s really good – I guess a supermarket crescent roll is no comparison.”

“No, it really isna,” I agreed.

After letting her be while she stuffed her face, and letting the effects of chocolate take hold, Brianna looked considerably more composed and relaxed. She sighed and sat back.

“I knew you and mom had a life together, I just didn’t know how much of one,” she quietly revealed, shaking her head.

“There’d be no reason for you tae know, lass. I canna imagine your mam freely talkin’ about our dark times when she ha’ buried the good ones, but we’ve both opened our hearts and let the memories flood back to fill them. And bein’ here, where it happened…”

“Would you have told me?...If I hadn’t screwed up your plans?”

I took in and released a deep breath.

“I’m sure at some point, we would have, but you’ve been through so much of late…I doona think we’d have volunteered it just now – your mam and I are still struggling with this, Claire with decades and I with…centuries –

it is still a raw loss, brought home to us all the more by almost losing you.”

Her hand slowly reached out for mine.

Within moments, we had both slid from our stools and stood holding each other.
“Mo chridhe,” I murmured in her ear. She may not have understood the word, but by the way her hands clutched momentarily, she heard my heart.

~~~~

We walked and talked our way around the streets of Paris, and with it being just the two us, it was easier to tell her some of the difficult truths of my life. Although she didna know to ask about him by name, she did ask me about ‘the man who shattered my soul’, so I told her, much the way my sister Jenny had enforced, that I would tell her these details only once about my encounters with Black Jack Randall, for the level of darkness that man visited upon me, and Claire, and Jenny, and the world in general, were bad enough in their time, and need not be loosed on the world yet again. There is already too much evil swirling in today’s air.

As a child of mine, she understood instinctively how hard it was for me to tell her such things, even once. I swear I could see her thinking, taking in what I told her and beginning to come to terms with yet another set of revelations.

“Does mom know all of this?” she tentatively asked, turning to face me on the sidewalk.

“Aye…she does…We had to fight hard to get past it, but your mam was willing to go to hell itself to bring me back to her, and I knew I must do the same when the situation called for it. And because of it, because we fought our way back to each other, we were blessed with you. Had I thought for a moment I would survive Culloden, and that your mam could have brought you safely into the world we shared, I would have made it so - I’d have never sent her away.”

I did my best to answer Brianna’s questions as we walked off our decadent French breakfast. Her cheeks had pinked up, a vast improvement over the pallid-faced child with whom I had ventured out onto the streets.

“Are you feeling better?” I asked tentatively, holding her chin in my hand.
She nodded and fought to bring a smile to her lips.

“I know there is…much to absorb, but none of it changes how your mam or how I feel about you.”

Bree bit her bottom lip and nodded.

“I know,” she said starting to tear up, “But I’ve never been so aware of being cared for…loved,” she choked out.

“You are, lass. You are loved whole-heartedly.”

Brianna hugged me yet again, and I felt like I was floating. After waiting so long, I would never grow tired of her arms around my neck. I could imagine holding her as a young girl who needed to be carried at the end of a long day, her sleepy head down on my shoulder as I carried her to bed. I could place myself in her life, put myself into the pictures Claire had shown me early on.

With a sigh, I let her go, looking up to see where we were. We were steps from a flower shop, and I thought of the times I’d returned to Paris, and had gone to Faith’s grave to place a flower on the marker in the memory of the child I never met.

Brianna saw my faraway gaze and took my hand.

“Do you take her flowers?” she asked.

“Aye, I have done…many times.”

“Would it be alright if I did?”

She looked unsure, not just about bringing flowers, but as to if she should go at all – like it would
be an invasion.

I brought her hand up to my lips and kissed the back of it.

“Aye.”

We headed in, each choosing a flower for Faith’s grave.

~~~~~

Claire looked refreshed and ready to face the day when we returned to the suite.

“Hungry…or still in need of…”

“Starving, and well past having been sick this morning,” she retorted.

“Bree?” she questioned, hoping our girl was in better stead than she had been last night.

“Mom,” she said as she hugged Claire.

“You were sick again? So I guess…”

“It looks likely…sorry to add to the surprises.”

“It’s OK. I can deal with it…all of it. Jamie and I had a good talk, and some amazing chocolate,” Bree brightly informed her mother.

“Speaking of which,” I interjected, “No chocolate to go, but the croissant is pretty good all on its own.”
Claire devoured the croissant, barely missing the tissue it was wrapped in. I made her a cup of tea from the complimentary beverage caddy – a better choice than the instant coffee from my experience – and she washed her throat down.

“What else is it you have there?” Claire asked, seeing that each Brianna and I had brought a package other than the promised breakfast.

“Flowers…for Faith,” I said.

“Bree?” Claire again questioned our girl, “You…want to come with us?”

“I need to – do you think these are appropriate?” Bree asked, un-wrapping her flowers.

Claire sucked in a breath, seeming shocked as she looked at the small purple/blue blossoms. She sank down and sat on the bed.

“Forget-me-nots,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry – did I do something wrong?” Bree asked as she knelt on the floor in front of Claire.

“This all started because of forget-me-nots. I went back to the stones that day because of forget-me-nots.” She was speaking as if in a trance.

Brianna turned and looked to me for an explanation, but I had none.

“Sassenach?”

Claire looked up at me and smiled.

“The day I fell through time, I had gone back to Craig-na-dun because of a flower I couldn’t rightly identify. I was going to take a sample of it back to the manse, try to match it to some reference
book, but I was quite
certain it was some variety of forget-me-nots.”

She looked away from me and back to Brianna.

“It’s a perfect choice, not just because it’s how I came to be in the right place at the right time, but
because I will never forget – losing her made it possible for me to have you.”

~~~~~

We walked into the cemetery. Jamie and mom were holding hands, supporting each other as they
walked unerringly to where my sister was buried. I stayed back, letting them have a moment of
reflection and memory

without me. I heard a high-pitched peep and saw my mom lean her head into Jamie’s chest. I
fought not to cry myself seeing how much this was hurting them.

I came up to the flat marker and kneeled next to it.

“I know these flowers won’t even survive the night in this winter air,” I spoke to her engraved
name, “But I guess that kinda…makes some kind of sense, because you didn’t have much time in
the world. But, these are

forget-me-nots, and I promise, I will never forget you even though I never met you, and I didn’t
know you existed before yesterday. Our mom and dad love us, and I would have loved to have a
big sister. I’m here for them

now.”

The chill that had been at my back disappeared. Mom and Jamie had knelt to either side of me, and
each put an arm around me. I watched as they each reached out their free hand and placed it in the
grass to either side of

the marker. Jamie kissed me on the cheek.

“You do us all proud,” he burred in my ear.
After some time with the three of us bundled together in front of Faith’s grave, we all stood. I watched my mom wipe the tears out of the corners of her eyes, and put on that ‘well, that’s over’ smile. It was her way of signaling that even if she was still very sad, she couldn’t let it control her. I’d seen it before, but I understood it today.

We paid our respects to Mother Hildegard. Mom and dad both had some nice things to say about her, but I was pretty sure they’d barely scratched the surface of what she had meant to both of them. Mom walked a few graves over, bent and ran her hand across another marker.

“Good dog,” she said softly.

~~~~~

I offered to make myself scarce until I left for home, but Jamie and my mom wouldn’t hear of it. After an afternoon rest, and me finally finding my way to my own room, the three of us went to dinner together. It caused a bit of a stir, as they had booked the dinner for two, but Jamie’s powers of persuasion, and perfect French, convinced them to make it a table for three. There were times I wondered what those around us must be thinking – a romantic dinner for three? But no one seemed to even notice – maybe I was the only one who thought it looked odd!

We didn’t talk all that much while we were eating, but once we had reached the dessert course things started to change.

“Have you got ideas for what you want to do with Lallybroch yet?” Jamie asked.

I smiled and looked up from my chocolate cake.

“Actually, I’ve been sketching since before I told you I’d do it – thankfully I didn’t lose those along with everything I was wearing.”
I turned and placed a hand on Jamie’s sleeve.

“Where do all your things go when...you come back?”

Jamie burst into a broad smile, and puffed out a laugh.

“Wish I knew, lass – I’d love to have much of it back myself – the contents of my sporran at the very least. I lost some valued treasures before I learned to deposit them somewhere safe.”

I nodded, thinking I was actually pretty lucky to have only lost my clothes. Out of nowhere a scent filtered into my nose. I was sure if I turned around Wake was going to be standing there. I dared to look over my shoulder,

but no one was there.

“Bree?” Mom asked, seeing the look of fear that must have been in my eyes.

“Your hands are like ice,” she said, placing hers on top of mine.

“I’m OK, just a flash of memory...from after the tower.”

Jamie put one of his big palms on my back, and looked greatly concerned.

“Has it been haunting you?” he asked with an upinflection.

“Not too much,” I told them, screwing a smile on my face.

“Are you going to be alright flying home without us?” Mom asked, knowing I wasn’t the best flyer.

I nodded.
“I’ll be fine…so…getting back to Lallybroch, and my plans…I won’t do anything major without checking with you first – maybe we could do some rough sketching when you get home -after I have the exact dimensions…”

“No problem,” Jamie pointed at his forehead, “they’re all up here, down to the inch.”

I must have cast a doubting look back at him, because he smiled and said, “I’ll get you an official copy of the plans, too.”

I bit my bottom lip and could feel the blush creeping up my cheeks.

~~~~~

Jamie hung onto me tightly, unwilling to say goodbye quickly, and I closed my eyes and let him hold me until he felt ready to let go. I wasn’t quite used to it yet, but I wasn’t afraid of it anymore.

He smiled proudly at me for a long time as he held me at arm’s length.

“Be safe,” he advised.

“I will…and I’ll work on what DVD we can watch next.”

“I look forward to it, Brianna,” he said with the nod of his head. I guess he had been as nervous to say my name as I had been to hug him, but we had both found our way around those hurtles now.

I turned to mom, Jamie still unwilling to let go of my hand. I wrapped my free arm around her and got a kiss on the cheek.

“We’ll be back in Boston before you know it,” she reassured me.

“Don’t worry about it. Enjoy what’s left of your honeymoon – sorry I barged in on Paris…but I’m glad you told me about Faith…and everything,” I added, looking back at Jamie. “I think I…understand you both better
now…and…I know you understand me and what I’ve been through.”

Jamie wrapped around mom and me, almost squeezing the air out of me until I heard an announcement.

“OK, OK folks. I need to go now. Don’t want to miss my flight, or I might be here for the rest of your honeymoon,” I joked.

Jamie looked contrite as he clasped his own hands together in front of himself, fishy little grin taking over his face. Mom looked wistful, reluctant to let me out of her sight, but she let out a gushing breath and nodded at me as she took a step back. She blindly reached out her hand and found Jamie’s hand waiting.

They clung more and more to each other as I headed toward the secure zone, watching me until the very last second they could, and I knew they were each in good hands.

~~~~~

As much as I hate to fly, getting back to Boston would at least put me in familiar territory, and right now, I needed a little ‘normal’ in my life. There was an odd sense of Christmas cheer among the passengers and it helped me forget we were sealed in a tin can at altitude.

I actually managed to fall asleep on the plane, dreaming the whole way home about being ensconced in a strong pair of arms. Just before I woke, I leaned my head back, expecting to see Jamie’s smile, but found a pair of green eyes instead.

I woke with a start as we began our descent into Logan.

~~~~~
The New Normal

Chapter Notes

Don't know who saw my message last week, but as I said in it, I've been sick and injured, but diligently working on this new chapter, and I hope the wait has not been too difficult to endure! (Although gathering intel - i.e. - watching everything I could get my hands on with Richard Rankin in it, did have a therapeutic value in my recovery.)

The New Normal

“She should be landing soon,” Claire said, looking at the clock and then back at Jamie.

“Aye,” he answered, leaning back against the headboard, inviting Claire to join him on the bed with the raise of an eyebrow and a pat of the mattress.

Claire had been nervous from the moment Brianna left her sight, and had been pacing since they returned to their hotel room.

“Come, relax wi’ me,” Jamie requested of her.

“I’ve never been this far away from her,” Claire revealed, crumpling to the mattress.

Jamie reached out and pulled Claire back into his arms, kissing her on the neck.

“Call her – leave her word to call you back, let you know she’s arrived home.”

~~~~~

Still feeling a bit rattled after realizing she had dreamed of being in Wake’s arms the whole way home, Brianna almost bent down and kissed the ground once she had been able to deplane. She checked her phone as she
took a breather at a booth in one of the airport food stops, finding two messages waiting – one from her parents, one from Wake MacKenzie.

“Hello sweetie, call us when you land so we know you’re safe,” Claire’s voice sweetly requested, “Aye, lass…Brianna…we miss you already…” Jamie added, “Doona make your mam worry – or me.”

Brianna smiled and felt that warm sensation in her chest. She speed-dialed her mom.

“Hi mom, I’m here, I’m safe.”

“Good to hear,” Claire replied in a pitchy voice followed by several deep breaths. “Oh, God,” was what Brianna heard next, and her face went immediately pink.

‘I am sooo interrupting,’ Bree thought.

“Have fun,” she said into the phone and quickly cut the connection.

~~~~~

“She’s safe?” Jamie asked.

“Yesssss,” Claire hissed out, depositing the phone aside.

Jamie locked his hands through hers and got back to lavishing Claire with affection.

~~~~~

Brianna took a deep breath, and eyed the other message. She decided she wanted to be home, and safely locked in her room, before she listened to what he had to say. Just thinking of Wake had her nervous, and unfamiliarly excited. She was glad she had packed relatively light and could just sling her bag over
her shoulder for the multiple transfer T ride home. The electrical hum and dim lighting of the Greenline trolley that saw her
to the stop in front of her building were welcome. Bree dropped down the steps, her knees feeling just the slightest bit weak as she finally hit the pavement.

She was home.

Brianna looked across the street and traced her view up the building she had left just over two weeks ago. Everything else was the same, but she wasn’t – and that was a good thing. Bree let out a deep breath and began the walk that would take her back to the room her former life was housed in. No one else was there. The roommates all had other plans for the holidays, and Bree was glad she’d have the place to herself for the next few days.

There was a lot to process, and the potential for dreams that might cause Brianna to call out in her sleep, and she didn’t want to have to explain anything. She settled in, kicked off her shoes, and looked once again at her phone. Her index finger was tremoring as she tapped to hear the message from Wake.

“Hey, Bree, sorry you couldn’t spend Christmas with us. I had another look at Lallybroch, and I see no reason why you can’t make it good as new. Mam says you’re going ahead with the project, I’ve got an opening in my schedule, and I’d be glad to be your liaison until such time as ye can get back here yourself. Let me know – I’ve got a few other offers for what I could do next, but I’m giving you first right of refusal. But to be perfectly honest, I see such potential in Lallybroch, I’d love to have a hand in it. Alright, talk soon.”

Even though she had spent the last few weeks surrounded by people who sounded just like Wake, there was something about his voice that just gave her chills. She listened to his message three more times. After trying several times to figure out the time difference, Bree decided it was safer to send Wake an email reply – but then she realized, he had all her contact info, but she had none of his!

“Ugghhhh, how could I forget!” Bree bemoaned, grabbing her own forehead in frustration.

Brianna flopped across her bed.
“I’m not gonna deal with anything until I’ve gotten some sleep - I can’t deal with anything right now.”

A loud rumbling sound awakened Brianna. It was only when the sound recurred she recognized it. It was her own stomach growling. She had slept for the better part of twelve hours, and was only waking now in the wee small hours of the morning. She needed to eat something, but since she’d been in Scotland, Bree hadn’t had to fend for herself or make any meals, and there would be nothing tantalizing just sitting about waiting for her to happen upon it.

“The cupboard is bare,” she reconfirmed as she opened the last door of the kitchen cabinets.

It was the first time Brianna had noticed the little Christmas tree on the counter, and the four gifts that sat beneath it, all with labels addressed to her. With an impish grin, Bree shook each package, listening for clues as to what might be inside.

“Sounds like cookies,” she said after shaking the third package.

She opened it to confirm, and set to making herself coffee while the neck of the ginger bread man was clamped tightly between her teeth.

Bree tried to get a few more hours of shuteye after her early morning snack, but she found herself staring at the ceiling.

“Too quiet,” she murmured into the air.

She reached over the edge of her bed and rummaged through the front pocket on the backpack that
had just survived international travel. She grabbed her MP3 player and her ear buds and settled back on the mattress. She
tapped the button several times until a song that struck her fancy began to play, and she wiggled into the pillows and blankets to make herself comfortable. It was the distraction she needed to let her mind relax, and within
two songs, she was falling asleep again.

~~~~~

Bree still had a lot of thinking to do, so much to assimilate in her mind, and she wished she could just hole up in her bedroom until everything made sense again, but she didn’t know how long that would take, or if it would ever happen. Besides, she was getting really hungry, and she’d decapitated all the ginger men, and eaten them to the last crumb, so necessity took over. Brianna bundled up, grabbed her shopping bags and her debit card,
as well as a little bit of cash, and braved late December in Boston. First stop was for lunch – one she didn’t have to make, and that would be ready quickly. That’s where the cash came in. It just never made sense to her to buy a five dollar fast food meal with her debit card – and there had been a few stories in the news about skimmers and hackers that steal your account numbers and lead to full on identity theft from fast food chains, and
Bree preferred to keep out of that possible trap.

Unfortunately, Bree’s preferred grocery store was not directly on the train lines, but newly fortified with a hot meal, she didn’t mind a bit of a walk in the cold. She bit her lip as she thought about walking through Paris with
Jamie. He was a part of her life now, and she missed him right now. Brianna smiled and picked up her pace as the wind threatened to blow her hood back. She dipped her head and plowed on through.

~~~~~

Some of Fiona’s meals had clearly worked their way into Brianna’s consciousness to look at what she had come home with. Fresh meat and vegetables were a bit more prevalent than usual, but Bree had also bought the
makings for quick meals, sandwiches and the like, and of course she had resupplied her cocoa and brownie making collection, and even bought a couple of store-baked croissants, knowing they
wouldn’t be as good as the ones she and Jamie enjoyed together, but, she’d make due. Cooking a nice supper actually relaxed Brianna. She felt grounded, reconnected, like she had cobbled together a patch between her life before and her life now, spliced the two sides together in the smallest way.

Thoughts and images charged through her brain. Parental love, the stirrings of romantic love, a sister she never knew, her mom pregnant with a new sibling, rebuilding Lallybroch – leaving Boston!

It was then the time struck her. “Damn,” she blurted. “I hope it’s not too late to call.”

She pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of her jeans pocket and smoothed it out on the kitchen island. She’d jotted a few notes, talking points, in case she got flustered trying to talk to Wake. She brought his message up, and tapped the number, taking deep breaths as it rang.

“Aye?” a voice questioned.

“Wake?” she asked, not sure.

“Aye, last I checked.”

Bree could almost picture him half asleep, bleary eyed.

“Sorry to call so late…”

“Who is this?”

“Brianna Fraser, I – “

“Oh, och, yeah,” he cut her off, sounding like he’d been jolted wide awake, “let me get a light on.”
“If you’d rather do this another time…”

“NO, no – the sooner the better…so you made it home safe?” he asked.

“Yeah…I got your message right after I landed, but…I wasn’t in a fit state to call. I couldn’t sort the time difference, and I guess I’m no better off today.”

“No harm done – so, are you taking me up on my offer?” he eagerly inflected.

“I’d like to hire you to help me restore Lallybroch,” she said, then exhaled, feeling a nervous flip in her stomach.

“Brilliant…yeah. I’d be thrilled, but could we pick this up at a better hour – how about we Skype later today?”

“It is too late, I’m sorry – oh, I don’t have your contact info.”

“Not to worry, I’ll call next time – would your six AM be doable?”

“I can set an alarm!” Bree blurted loudly.

“Would noon be better for ye?”

“That’s…six PM for you?” she tried to clarify.

“Aye. It would be good if we were both awake.”

“I am sorry about the hour – I – I didn’t want you to think I was ignoring your message.”
“Like I said, no harm done. We’ll hash it all out – face to face, as it were – twelve hours on, then.”

“Good night,” she offered.

“You too.”

Bree didn’t realize how tightly she had been gripping the phone until she found she could not let go of it even enough to end the call. Wake had hung up promptly, so the connection had been severed and he wouldn’t be listening in while Bree pried her fingers loose.

“This is ridiculous,” Brianna admonished herself. “You barely know him…it’s just a business arrangement…If only he wasn’t so hot.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Was time going backward? Brianna looked at the clock again. It can’t have been only ten minutes since she checked the time. This was going to be a long twelve hours. There was nothing on TV, no class assignments to work on – there had to be a way to pass the time, and even though Bree wasn’t fully attuned to the time zone she was in, sleep was not the answer. She began to unpack her bag, knowing she would need it once the new semester started. It was mostly dirty laundry, and once that was sorted, she went about returning her toiletries to the caddy she carried to the shower from the zipper bag they’d made it through customs in. Just one thing remained in her backpack - her sketchpad, filled with notes and little drawings, approximate measurements, and the layout of the out-buildings, or where they had been. As she pored over her drawings, Lallybroch came to life in her mind’s eye. She could already visualize a major change she wanted to make in the layout – making the old kitchen into a livingroom instead, using the old cooking hearth as the centerpiece.

Before she knew it, hours had gone by and she had roughly drawn her ideas for the entire first floor, subject to change should Jamie object. Also subject to change if the plans showed a significant difference in room dimensions from what Bree surmised from her limited time assessing the building. Brianna sighed with relief as she surveyed her evening’s work. “Not bad,” she commented as she stood from her
drawing table. The more work she did on the Lallybroch project the more comfortable she became with the idea of making her ancestral home into a modern, livable space for her parents.

Bree padded out to the kitchen to get a drink. The water slaked her thirst, but it wasn’t what she really wanted. The comfort of a warm cocoa before trying to sleep was what she needed. She blended up her usual mixture,

but it came out a little too hot. Brianna poured it into a mug and let it steam away on the counter while she changed for bed – cocoa in jammies always tasted better anyway, and then she could pour herself into bed with the chocolate effects intact.

~~~~~

Brianna slept soundly despite all that was on her mind. When she first woke, the last few weeks felt like a convoluted dream, but the reality of it all settled once she was fully awake.

“I couldn’t have made that up if I tried,” she murmured to herself, thinking of all that transpired while she had been back in Scotland.

She tried to convince herself this was a normal day. She got up, showered, had breakfast, perused her drawings from the night before, looked through a couple of her text books – and it was still only nine-thirty in the morning.

“Maybe I should have said yes to six AM,” Bree said shaking her head.

Bree made sure her computer was set up to receive Wake’s incoming call, and headed to the kitchen for something to soothe her nerves, if such a thing existed.

It was actually a relief when one of her roomies returned from vacation just before ten.

“Oh, you’re back…How was the wedding? Did you meet any cute guys? Were you allowed to drink? What do guys wear under their kilts? Did you try to find out for yourself?”
The questions came in an endless stream, with no time to answer in between. She didn’t even stop talking while she carted her suitcase into her room. Bree grabbed a drink and settled onto the couch in the common room, waiting for the litany to continue.

“So,” the roomie came back at Bree with, “did you get our gifts?”

“Um, yeah, the little tree was a nice touch,” Brianna commented, genuinely smiling.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you actually smile,” the returned roommate viewed.

Bree blushed.

“I’m sure you have, but it was a rare event,” Brianna admitted, realizing she was more at ease than what was usual before.

“So…who put the smile on your face?” she asked.

“It’s not what you think,” Brianna admonished. “I’ve got my first design job for after graduation – I’m restoring my ancestral home in Scotland – I’ll be leaving right after I finish my classes.”

“Oh, wow…wait, you’re leaving before our lease is up?”

“I’ll pay all the way through, unless you know someone who’d like to sub-let for a couple of months?”

“I might…so that’s…wow.”

“I know. An entire estate will be in my hands. It’s exciting, and frightening,” Bree admitted. “I’ve actually got a meeting at noon – via Skype, with the guy who’s going to be my, I guess he’ll be the project manager. He’s the
one who will get the ball rolling, and see to the permits, and find the workers…”

The roomies eyes were starting to glaze over.

“I know, you couldn’t care less about the details, could you?” Brianna asked.

“Sorry, we are just from different worlds. But I am happy for you. How’d it go being with your parents the last few weeks?”

“Never a dull moment, I can tell you that.”

“Good or bad?”

“A little bit of each – the real biggie – my mom might be pregnant – how’s that for a college graduation present?”

“We tell them to be careful, and they go and get themselves in trouble, don’t they?”

Bree laughed and nodded.

“I know, and you should have seen the look on my dad’s face!”

Bree found herself wanting to tell everything, but knew this was just about the only revelation she could make, and was probably the longest conversation she’d ever had with any of the girls who shared this apartment.

“Well, I should unpack,” the roomie revealed as she stood. “It’s good to see you so happy, Bree.”

~~~~~

A sense of panic struck Brianna when her computer alerted her to the incoming Skype call. She ran
her fingers through her hair and settled in front of the computer on her desk. Bree closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening communications. She clasped her shaking hands together, finding her palms were sweaty. She wiped them off on the thighs of her pants, momentarily clamped her hands into fists, and clicked. Wake’s smile came up full screen, and Brianna couldn’t hold a smile off her face either.

“Hi,” she feebly croaked out, then cleared her throat.

“So…”

“Um…” she hummed. “How do we get started?”

“Well, I pulled any plans I could find for Lallybroch – quite the history there.”

“I know, well, I know some of it, what my dad has told me, anyway, but I’m sure there’s plenty I don’t know about too.”

“Did you know it was used to house children relocated during the war?”

“No, I didn’t. That's cool.”

“Aye, and that’s about when the indoor plumbing was first installed – that little second floor loo, but it was all older fixtures, so it looks like it was done up in the late twenties.”

“If Lallybroch could talk!”

“Aye, to be sure…so…according to my findings, your father acquired the property in the early eighties, but has done nothing with it…I was able to find plans, but not blueprints – they may require you to have it surveyed.”

“Is that a problem?” she sounded fearfully.
“Just the first of many hurdles,” Wake replied with a smile. “Doona fash.”

“So…what do you need? To get things started, I mean?”

“The first thing I need is to know you better.” Brianna gulped, and one eyebrow sprang up.

“It’s not how it sounds – I need to know your vision for the house. If I know you, I know what to expect, somewhat, of the plans, and then I can anticipate your needs.”

The explanation was good right up until Wake said, “anticipate you needs.” Bree got chills at those words, and a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“OK,” she forced out, trying to keep her mind on construction, not seduction, but feeling the blush on her cheeks.

“I…I did some drawings last night – ideas for the ground floor. I could…send you those, if you think they would help – it’s nothing official. I’m not even sure if the dimensions are completely correct, I just kinda doodled these drawings.”

“Sometimes it’s the hand-drawn scribblings that are the most useful – they can give you insights into the person who drew them, and sometimes that’s more useful than a perfectly rendered mechanical drawing.”

“Before you get off, give me a go,” a muffled voice at Wake’s end spoke, a hand appearing on his shoulder and Wake turning his eyes away from the screen and saying, “OK”, then turning his attention back to Brianna.

“I’ll email you all my contact details, so you can send those drawings on – I’ll also send you a reminder of the time difference so we don’t interrupt each other’s sleep,” he said with a sly smile.

Brianna was absolutely charmed by Wake.
“Sorry about calling so late,” she said, falsely chagrinned, “I’ll try not to interrupt your off hours.”

“We’ll get a handle on things – So, me Da needs a word,” Wake told Bree as he stood, but tried to keep his face in front of the camera.

“Hey Wren, look at that lovely smile,” Roger complimented. “I just want to let you know we shipped that ‘crate’ of yours – Fee slipped some Christmas treats and sundries in, but it should be coming in the next few days. Could you be at your parents’ residence to accept the delivery?”

“Sure, just send me the tracking info so I know when to be there – I hope Jamie paid for the return shipping!”

“Aye, he slipped me a few bills before you left…You doin’ alright alone in Boston?”

“I’m not alone – my roommates are starting to filter back in, and I’ve always felt at home in this city.”

“Of course, dear, but your mam was always there before…Och, I know ye’re nearly grown, but… we’re concerned.”

“It’s OK,” Bree comforted, “After all that happened while I was there, I’d probably be more upset if I thought you didn’t care.”

“Aye, well, we do care, verra much.”

Wake poked his head in front of Roger.

“Hey, after I’ve had a chance to know you better by looking over your drawings, we’ll Skype again and hash things over. Can’t wait to get my hands dirty.”

Roger pushed his son out from between him and the camera.
“It was good to see you again. Don’t be a stranger. We love you, Wren.”

“Goodnight,” Bree exhaled and shut her computer.

She threw herself across her bed and put her hand to her chest. The feelings washing over her were thrilling, but so alien to her. With the similarities between Roger’s and Wake’s voices, for a moment it was like Wake had said he loved her, and though it was ridiculous to even entertain the notion, Bree found herself thrown back to being in Wake’s arms. The warm secure feeling mixed with the excitement that rippled through her body.

“Get a grip on yourself, Fraser,” Brianna admonished herself, “It’s just a side effect…it has to be.”

~~~~~

Brianna came out of her room heading for the kitchen. Her mouth had gone dry. She took a bottle of water out of the fridge and downed it voraciously, then placed her now chilled hand on her forehead. The returned roommate watched Bree’s actions and smirked.

“So, ‘project manager’ you say?” she teased as she crossed her arms on her chest. “He must be really hot if he gets to you like that. I always thought you were immune.”

Bree shyly smiled.

~~~~~

With spare key in tow, Brianna took the T to the house her parents were calling home right now. The ‘crate’ was due in, and she wanted to be there to accept delivery as she had promised Roger. If it had been a warmer day, she would have sat on the steps, maybe with a warm drink, and braved the outdoors, but it was not a day for that. Her cocoa would have been a frozen fudge pop in no time.
It felt a little weird to enter the house alone, but she was glad to duck out of the wind, and felt quickly warmed in the shelter of the foyer. Bree made her way into the modern kitchen and found herself compelled to make coffee. It took probing several cabinets to find what she needed, but soon the smell of coffee was wafting deliciously on the wind. Brianna sighed at the aroma. She was taking a mug out of another cupboard when the doorbell rang. Through the sidelights, Brianna could see a cadre of delivery men standing in the yard, and one standing at the top of the steps just outside the door, toting an electronic clipboard. She could see her father’s ‘crate’ among the other men, so she figured it was safe to open the door to them.

“Hi,” she brightly greeted.

“Delivery for Fraser?” the man at the top of the steps asked.

“Yes.”

“Sign here,” he said, offering the clipboard in her direction, “Sorry for your loss,” he added, momentarily leaving Brianna confused.

“Oh, no, it’s just a crate,” she sought to correct. “My dad has a weird sense of humor,” she offered, handing the signed delivery slip back over, surprised when a printed receipt was proffered.

“Oh, thanks. Just bring it into the foyer.”

She backed away from the door to make space for the men to carry it into the house, watching them having trouble hoisting it up the steep stairs, smirking as she remembered how effortlessly Jamie had taken it out of the house.

“Thank-you very much,” she said with a nod at each of the men.
Once the door was closed, the wafting coffee hit Bree’s nostrils yet again. With a deep breath, she headed back into the kitchen, and poured herself a cup. She sat at the kitchen table, letting the mug warm her hands as she nursed it along. She remembered what Roger had said, that Fiona had packed some Christmas treats for them to enjoy, but Brianna wasn’t in a mood to find and use a crowbar just to get a cookie right now.

~~~~~

It seemed somehow wrong to just leave so soon after arriving, so Brianna gave herself a bit of a tour. Out of curiosity, Bree headed upstairs, but found all the rooms locked. She sat at the top of the stairs and looked down on the foyer. It was an impressive open expanse. It felt peaceful, and helped to relax the tension she’d been feeling ever since Wake’s Skype call. When she sent him the scans of her drawings, she couldn’t help feeling like she was sending him nude pictures of herself after the way he described getting to know her better. Now, sitting in a mostly white space, devoid of clutter, and personality for that matter, it was like a depravation tank, and it was drawing the confusion out of her brain.

Bree took a deep breath.

“I want to feel normal, but what does that mean anyway? I guess…this is my ‘new’ normal.”

Her mind now calmer, Bree came down the stairs slowly. She continued through the house, hoping the Leoch room was unlocked, or that the key was easily accessible. Jamie had been so careful while they had been restoring the room to keep it locked all the time, but she wasn’t sure what he’d been doing since the room had been unveiled. She gave the knob a twist, and was glad to find the door opened. The smoky smell of a burned out fire greeted her, and it felt welcoming. As she looked around the room she felt proud of the hand she’d had in making this room what it was. She could see why her parents would have fond memories of a room like this – everything about it was inviting. Brianna sat on the end of the bed, nervous for some reason, or at least slightly chilled. She shivered and crossed her arms on her chest.

“I have the oddest feeling I shouldn’t be in here right now,” Brianna said, drawing herself off the
She took one more look around.

“This is a room for…lovers…not me.”

She pulled the door shut behind her and made her way down the hall to the media room. Before descending into the seating pit, Bree scanned the DVD collection to see if something caught her fancy.

“Vaguely Historical?” Bree questioned, reading the shelf label, and puffing a laugh out as she continued to scan the DVD spines.

Her finger halted thumping along the cases and a broad smile overtook her face.

“Now I get it,” she murmured, understanding the odd category at last, “I haven’t watched this in ages!” she excitedly said to the air as she pulled the DVD for The Princess Bride off the shelf, deciding right then she was going to stay and watch the movie.

As she settled in, she slipped off her boots and pulled a throw blanket over her shoulders to fight the slight chill she was feeling. This movie was cinematic comfort food for Brianna, taking her back to simpler days and the rare nights her mother was free to just sit and watch a movie instead of falling asleep studying to become the surgeon she now was. By the time Princess Buttercup heard “as you wish”, revealing the true identity of the man in the mask, Bree was deeply nestled on the couch, feet pulled up, pillow wrapped in her arms as she fought to stay awake.

~~~

“It is so good to be home,” Claire declared as she and Jamie crossed the threshold into the foyer.

Jamie strongly kissed her, wrapping his arms around Claire as he dropped the suitcases to either side. He smiled as Claire smoothed the backs of her fingers up and down his cheeks, and they
gazed at each other lovingly

as the kiss ended. Jamie only had eyes for Claire, and expecting nothing in his way, began stepping
Claire backward, hoping to get her to the Leoch room before she knew what was happening, but they ran aground a few

steps along, Claire fetching up on the ‘crate’.

“What’s that doing here?” Claire asked, seeing that she was seated on the coffin.

“Brianna must have received it for us,” Jamie brightly asserted, taking a deep breath afterward.

“You are really enjoying saying her name, aren’t you?” Claire happily hummed.

“Aye, it…warms my heart. I was afraid to say it, afraid to call my daughter by her own name, and she was afraid to hug me, but now…”

“But now…you can…and she can…and someday soon…she’ll be able to call you ‘dad’.”

Jamie moved in for a quick kiss, Claire sucking in air through her nose so he didn’t make her too
light headed.

“Mmm, I smell coffee, fresh coffee,” Claire emphasized.

“She must be here!” Jamie excitedly peeped.

He took in a deep breath and opened his mouth wide to call out his daughter’s name, but Claire clamped her hand over his mouth.

“Don’t, you might startled her.”

Jamie took Claire’s hand away from his mouth with a nod of his head.
“Aye, let’s search her out, but I have a feeling as to where she is.”

~~~~~

Hands tightly held together, Jamie led them down to the media room, and from the library level they could see Brianna’s curled form on the sectional couch. The menu screen was up on the TV, the movie long over.

“Don’t wake her,” Claire softly advised, “She’s been through so much, it’s nice to see she can sleep so calmly…peacefully.”

“Aye, but we should tuck her in. It can get cold inside the rooms with the stone foundations.”

“Don’t I know it,” Claire replied, rubbing her hands together and blowing warm air into her palms.

“I’ll get her a blanket, and then I’ll see to warming you up,” Jamie said with a smirk and a peck on the forehead.

Claire stood watch over her daughter while Jamie was off finding her a blanket. He came back with a huge puff, and headed down the ramp at the side of the room. Claire followed him down, but merely watched as Jamie gently plied her with the blanket, tucking it in all around her to keep the cold air at bay. As he tucked it in behind her head, and tried to get her extended arms covered, Bree moaned incoherently, and then mumbled, “Have fun stormin’ the castle,” the exact way Billy Crystal toned those words in the film. He looked over his shoulder, seeing Claire holding in a laugh with a curled index finger pressed to her lips. He looked back at his sleeping child. Jamie noticed the remote and slipped it out of Brianna’s fingers.

“Sleep well, a bheannachd,” he whispered, “sleep well, Brianna.”

He came to Claire’s side.
“What was that she said?” Jamie asked.

“It’s a line from the movie she watched,” Claire whispered in return, “we used to watch it together when she was little.”

Claire’s eyes showed great tenderness as she remembered Bree as a small child. For some time, the pair of them stood watching over their sleeping daughter, like she was a fresh newborn, fragile and in need of constant supervision. Claire leaned more and more heavily on Jamie as they stood there and she was almost asleep on her feet when Jamie eased her out of the room.

“No, I don’t want to leave her,” she barely eked out.

“It’s OK,” Jamie soothed, “she’s sleeping, and you should be too.”

“No, I’m hungry, and that coffee smelled so good.”

“Alright, a few sips, and I’ll find you something to nibble on, but then it’s to bed wi’ ye.”

~~~~~

Jamie got Claire settled into bed with him in the Leoch room, and she was asleep in no time, her arms invitingly wrapped around his chest, but Jamie sat wide awake, occasionally bending down to kiss Claire on the forehead, but mostly just watching his wife sleep. For the past week he’d let reality go, and enjoyed the last week of their honeymoon, pushing aside any concerns, but now that they were home, it began to hit him. Jamie’s hand cradled Claire’s belly. He’d done it twice before with her, each time wondering what it would be like to greet their child, to become a dad, but the chance never came.

He sighed deeply, closed his eyes, and tilted his head back as tears streamed down his cheeks.

~~~~~
“Mornin’ lass, er, Brianna,” Jamie purred the moment Bree stirred from sleep.

Brianna lurched to a sitting position, her feet slipping towards the floor, big puffy blanket providing a buffer to the outside world.

“Where’s mom?” Bree sleepily asked, trying to free her arms from the blanket.

“Finishing up her breakfast.”

“When did you get back?” she asked, continuing to try to shake the sleep out of her brain.

“Last night – too late to send ye home.”

“I didn’t mean to…”

“No need to explain; it was a nice treat to find you here, Brianna.”

The look he gave her was so full of hope and joy it triggered her smile in return, and she leaned in toward Jamie and threw her arms around his neck, sinking her head onto his shoulder.

“I missed you and mom,” she informed him, the near cry sounding in her voice.

Jamie’s arms were holding her tight in no time.

“It’s OK now, Brianna, mo leanabh, we are here; I am here.”

“I thought I’d gotten over it all, tried to put it behind me once I was home…did…did the…side effects ever…linger for you?” she tentatively asked.
“Aye, sure they did, I guess I just got used to it. Is that what’s been happening?”

“Maybe…everything feels different.”

“Och, I know – the changes you feel, they’ll become more comfortable in time – it’s…it’s like a new shell is forming – nearly the same, but just enough different to feel…wrong.”

Brianna sat back up, wiped her eyes and her nose with the back of her hand.

“I’m OK…just getting to know the new me – apparently I’m a bit of a crier now,” Bree offered as a shy smile crept up her face.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Jamie guaranteed.

Getting herself composed, Bree brushed her hair back, and managed to put the rest of the blanket aside. She found her boots and got them on. Jamie patiently sat there, ready to be her sounding board if anything else was asked.

“Did you find the crate?” Bree inquired as she finished arranging the ankles on her jeans, and stood.

“Aye, yer mam nearly fell over it – but that’s how we knew you were here, or had been.”

“Well, according to Roger, Fiona packed a few extras – I’m assuming cookies and the like, but you never know with Fiona.”

Jamie stood too.

“We’ll get ‘er open, then,” he offered, placing a supportive hand on Brianna’s back.

She turned and threw her arms around him, and he happily squeezed her tight.
“Mom!” Brianna exclaimed as she entered the kitchen.

“Oh, sweetie,” Claire replied, turning and taking her daughter into her arms.

Claire held her back to arm’s length, seeing a brightness in Brianna’s eyes that hadn’t been there for some time.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Claire told her, feeling as if the Brianna who had left for a beach vacation when she was sixteen was finally home, finally whole again.

“I’ll be right back,” Jamie said, slipping past them and giving Claire a kiss on the temple.

“Where?”

“Fiona packed some goodies in the crate, so we need to get it opened up,” Brianna enlightened her mother, then pulled her in tight for another hug.

“Is everything OK?” Claire whispered.

Brianna nodded against her mother’s neck.

“It will be.”

They disengaged and turned toward the sound when Jamie began prying the lid to the ‘crate’ free. They joined him in the foyer as he lifted the lid and found several new items packed on top, each one labeled.

“That’s not just cookies,” Brianna declared, realizing she’d not gotten the whole picture from Roger, or that he’d not gotten the whole story from Fiona.
Claire took the small package addressed to her, unfolding the letter that came with it.

“Dearest Claire, I know you told me to give away all the baby clothes once Brianna no longer was in need of them, and, for the most part, I did, but parting with this would have been a mistake. If you are indeed expecting again, (fingers crossed) I hope you will find a need for this. Love, Fiona. PS – you can always keep it for Brianna’s first born! (but perhaps don’t tell her that!)”

Claire read the letter aloud, up until the PS, and then sheepishly smiled as she folded the letter and tucked it into a pocket. She carefully unwrapped the tissue paper and choked up when she unveiled a small knitted hat that made the wearer look like a sheep.

“Little lamb,” Claire said reverently, “You wore this home from the hospital,” she said to Brianna.

Jamie then unloaded the package for Brianna and handed her the note.

“Brianna, here’s just a taste of what it would have been like had you celebrated a MacKenzie Christmas this year. (It was Wake’s idea to throw in a few kisses for your chocolate tooth) Much love from all of us! PS – don’t hoard it all for yourself!”

Bree laughed out at the PS and took the well secured tray into hand.

“I’ll put this in the kitchen,” Brianna confirmed, quickly striding there and back.

“What did she send for you…Jamie?” Bree asked as she came back into earshot.

“I couldn’t begin to guess,” he asserted, reaching for his own letter from Fiona.

“To our newest, and oldest, family member, my dear Jamie, you have imbued me, and Roger, with such family pride, and seeing you with Claire and Brianna reduces my fear about the two of them
being so far away. Now

they have you to keep them warm and safe, but there is a whole family wanting the same for you, so
when I saw this item, I knew I had to acquire it for you. Think of it as a warm Scottish hug from
distant kin. All Love,

Fiona.”

“You definitely won her over,” Claire said with a slight shake of her head and growing smile.

“Aye,” Jamie embarrassedly confirmed, ear tips quite pink as he turned toward the crate to pay too
much attention to the wrapping on his gift.

After rattling the tissue paper around for quite some time, Claire came to his side.

“Do I need to help you with that?” she asked.

“I’m a bit worrit to expose her gift to the light of day after what she wrote!”

Claire did the honors of unwrapping the gift for Jamie.

“Oh, my,” she cried out, lifting the item high over her head to get the last of it free from the
confines of the crate.

“What is it?” Bree questioned, blocked from seeing it by Claire’s body.

“It’s a coat – a great coat,” Claire replied, turning to show Brianna.

Their daughter approached, lamping onto the tag that still dangled from the sleeve.

“100% Shetland Wool,” she read, “Fee was probably pen pals with the sheep!” Brianna joked,
making Jamie laugh out loud, and then pull down into a sheepish grin.
Claire turned the coat and held it out to Jamie, inviting him to try it on. One arm at a time he let it slide up his body, easing his shoulders in, not wanting to tear it apart should it not fit, but it came up around him perfectly, with plenty of room for his broad shoulders. It flared from the shoulders down, the bottom hanging and swinging the way Jamie’s kilt did. Jamie looked like a dream in the winter white great coat.

Claire raised an eyebrow as Jamie turned to face her.

“And just how does Fiona know your size so well?”

One side of his lip curled up and he gave her half a grinchly grin. Jamie did a twirl, much like he had done to show off his kilt to Brianna before the wedding. Bree smiled, remembering how elegant he had looked in his kilt, but Claire held a pseudo pout on her face.

With a moment to think, Jamie opened both sides of the coat and invited his girls to join him inside the coat.

“I think the coat is family sized,” Jamie informed them as he pulled the sides around them.

After a prolonged family hug, Jamie sighed with delight, and bowed his head.

“I have a family. My heart is full.”
So, I’m on the mend more or less, but my computer is another story! My monitor went all Max Headroom, so I got another used one, that seemed to have some kind of sleeping disorder (ie intermittent short, or something) so it only worked after a great deal of frigging or then only when it wanted to. Luckily, original monitor got fixed, but level of residual frustration made writing difficult. I managed a short chapter - hopefully more level footing is ahead of me, and the words will come back to me, and I hope this chapter keeps you going until the words get flowing.

After so many days away from work, it was hard to get up, but I was due back at the hospital this morning with more than just work to take care of. It was time to face reality.

While I showered and dressed, Jamie made me breakfast – far more of a breakfast than my stomach was prepared for. I smiled apologetically as I sipped on my coffee, unable to partake in his generous offerings. If I wasn’t pregnant, I would have to look into what had caused my sudden inability to eat in the morning, but I seriously doubted I would need to look beyond the obvious.

As I put my coat on, I noticed Jamie donning the beautiful great coat Fiona had sent from Scotland.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

“I’m coming wi’ ye.”

“As wonderfully supportive as that is, there’s no reason for you to come with me today. There’s nothing they can tell us for sure until the test results come back, and I haven’t even taken the tests yet.”

“I want to be there, when you find out.”

“I promise,” I said, clasping hands with Jamie.
“I want you to be there…for every minute this time, for me, as much as for you.”

He leaned in and gave me a humming kiss that buzzed my lips. I stepped right up to him and planted my lips even more firmly against his.

“I’m afraid I might go into withdrawal after all this time together,” I told him. His ear tips went pink.

“Is Bree coming over today?” I asked, knowing it would change the topic benignly.

“No, not today. She said she needed to ‘get into the swing’ of the semester, with it being her last. I think she’s still scared about rebuilding Lallybroch.”

“I’m sure she is, but she’s also excited – the end of college is a pretty big deal. Up until now, she’s been a student. From the time she was five, that’s what life has been for her…for most all children. It’s a dependable pattern, but it’s coming to an end. And that’s for people who haven’t had their lives set completely on end recently. Think of all Bree’s been through. And then you take away that normal pattern that’s been with her for most of her life, and she’s bound to be scared. And then throw in restoring her ancestral home, but having to leave the home she knows to do it. Jamie, her whole life is changing.”

Jamie nodded, absorbing what I’d just told him.

“Aye, I ken that. Everything is in flux, and she has one more bit of what’s familiar before even that changes.”

He continued to nod, closing his eyes for a moment, and then letting a big breath.

“Dinner, then?”

I nodded and kissed him yet again.
“I look forward to it. I’m sure I’ll be starving, and quite able to eat when I get home.”

~~~~~

As I headed into work, I worried some about what Jamie would do without me close at hand, and with his worries about my probable pregnancy, but there was no way around it. I had to return to work. I was so far inside my own head I almost missed my stop.

I went to my office and reviewed case notes, trying to come up to speed, and like Brianna, get into the swing of things. But I was distracted, knowing I was putting off something I really needed to do. I sent the order for my blood work electronically, and hoped it would reach the lab before I did. I was no fan of needles, at least those piercing my own skin, but I wanted a definitive test. I know the urine test is accurate for most people, but Jamie and I need certainty.

I closed my eyes as the needle went into my inner arm.

“All done,” the technician calmly stated, “Press this tight,” she said, putting a small cube of gauze over the needle hole.

I sighed out a breath and let my shoulders fall.

I took a detour on the way back to my office, stopping in front of the nursery window. Babies of all sizes and colors, some silently staring out at the world, others crying and wailing at the recent change of venue, were there before my eyes. It was a first for me. Looking at babies was not something I did. I understood why Jamie was so worried, but I had to believe that if I was truly pregnant, it was something that was meant to be.

“I don’t think I’ve ever found you here before, Claire,” a voice said behind me.

“Janet,” I said with a smile. “No, I’ve never been here, in all the years I’ve worked here, but I was drawn here today.”

“Babies on the brain?” she asked.
I inhaled, turned to look at her and exhaled.

“A couple of test results will be coming your way – I…I may be pregnant – my symptoms are rather telling, but I need to be sure. Maybe we could schedule an appointment for the end of the week?”

Dr. Janet MacInnes was one of the good ones. A few years my junior, she’d come to work here not long after I finished my residency, and had become my doctor as well not a year after that. She was compassionate, intelligent and intuitive, and I wished like hell she’d been available after Brianna’s attack, as much for my sake as for Bree’s.

“Sure. But…weren’t we discussing the possible onset of peri-menopause at your last appointment?”

I raised one eyebrow at her and my lips narrowed.

“There have been some changes in my life, but as of yet, not that one!”

“That’s right, I heard you got married. You didn’t waste any time. Your results should be back in a few days, so…” she paused as she scrolled the screen on her phone. “Friday…either ten AM, or 3:45 PM?”

“Something tells me it better be the morning appointment,” I relayed – less time for Jamie to worry, I surmised.

She scheduled it and patted my shoulder.

“I’ll hold off on the congrats until we know for sure.”

~~~~~

I found Jamie in the media room when I got home.
“Did Bree show up and surprise you?” I asked, knowing he usually didn’t watch alone.

“Nah, I just,” he looked down and blushed, “I wanted to see the film our lass watched to comfort her. I hoped I could…feel close to her, understand her better…”

I smiled broadly and joined him on the couch, nestling into his chest, and taking a deep breath to inhale Jamie’s essence.

“What have you learned?” I asked.

“She likes word play – clever turns of phrase – I knew that from our time together, but I could…hear where she would laugh while I watched this. I understand why she would turn to this, why it would allow her to relax.”

I laced my hand through his.

“It’s a nice feeling, isn’t it? To understand what makes her tick – to feel a kinship.”

I had to gulp down the urge to cry just then, thinking of how many times Brianna had buoyed my spirits by bringing a bit of Jamie to the surface.

~~~~~

Jamie was nervous as he waited for Brianna to get there, and when she rang the bell he became giddy, and raced to the door.

“Brianna!” he called out, pulling her into his arms.

“Whoa, there,” she said in surprise, “It’s only been a few days.”

“Och, I know, but…I’ve been stockpiling hugs for you, and I don’t want a single one to go to waste.”
“That will never happen,” she replied.

Jamie held her for a long time. He just didn’t want to let go.

“Alright,” Brianna finally said, “We’ll run out of time for our movie,” she jokingly teased.

“Aye,” Jamie breathed, finally pulling back, but still holding Bree by the shoulders.

His smiled broadened.

“As you wish,” Jamie came out with, wondering if Brianna would recognize the phrase.

It took a second.

Bree turned pink.

“You watched…you watched The Princess Bride?”

“Aye, Brianna, I did…Would you want to…watch it wi’ me?” he hopefully asked.

“Not today, but we will, we absolutely will.”

Bree took hold of his hand reassuringly, and they walked in silence to the media room, bathed in each other’s smiles.

~~~~~

“Actually…I found something special for our first movie of the year,” Brianna reported as she came down the ramp, DVD in hand, pulled from the backpack slung over her shoulder.
“Turns out the library has a DVD section.”

“The library? So, it’s something you doona wish to own, but you want us to see?”

“Exactly. I caught part of this movie on TV like…five different times since I got back from Scotland – always the same part too. I’ve never seen the very beginning of it, either,” she continued as she set the disc in the player and sat on the couch, right next to Jamie.

An incredible grin came up on Bree’s face as she handed Jamie the DVD cover.

“Flash Gordon?” Jamie questioned.

“I know the music was the best thing about this movie, but it’s got a lot of familiar faces in it!” she enthused.

They both kind of looked at each other suspiciously as the film got off to a rather ponderous start, Bree even blushing a bit as she hoped it would pick up soon. When the familiar themes of the music by Queen picked up, Brianna settled down a bit, and she put her head on Jamie’s shoulder, much to his delight.

And then it happened – a moment that would bond them even tighter. As Brian Blessed first graced the screen, both Jamie and Brianna suddenly yelled out, “Fresh Horses!” in their best imitation of the actor’s un-modulated tones. They slowly turned toward one another, each in shock at the other’s outburst, smiles slowly cracking each face wide open.

“You’ve seen?” Jamie asked incompletely.

“Black Adder!” she blurted as she nodded affirmatively.

Laughter overtook them in the joy of having a common reference, something they’d both seen that had left an indelible impression on both their brains. Bree held him tightly around the neck, having laughed to the point of happy tears. She let out a relieved deep breath.
“I’m so glad you’re in my life,” she sighed against his exhaling chest.

“Aye, me too lass, me too.”

When both were sitting forward again, they realized a good portion of the movie had gotten away from them.

“Should I rewind?” Bree asked.

Jamie nodded, smile still ensconced on his face as Brianna snuggled against Jamie’s side once more, and they continued to watch the movie once Brianna had found a point they both recalled seeing.

~~~~~

“Is something wrong?” Bree asked once the movie was over, seeing something in Jamie’s eyes.

Jamie dropped his head.

“Your Mam has an appointment tomorrow…we find out if…”

“If I’m about to be a big sister?”

Jamie nodded.

“Well, that’s good…right? Knowing is better than wondering, isn’t it?”

“I’m scared to know either way.”
“Scared?…but you already know you’re a good…dad, don’t you? You’ve only been in my life a few months, but everything you’ve done and said…your patience – knowing what not to do…you’ll get to be a father from the start this time. You won’t have to make up any time.”

“You know no matter what, no one will take your place in my heart. You’ve been,” Jamie stopped and pointed with two held together fingers to a spot on his chest, “right here from the moment I knew you existed.”

Bree tilted her head.

“I know,” she said with a nod, “And I couldn’t be happier for you and mom – a little shocked when I first heard, but…I’m just sorry I won’t be here for all of it.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll already be restoring Lallybroch during mom’s third trimester.”

His lips pursed and he looked concerned.

“Aye.”

Jamie sat silently unmoving, awash in his fears for a minute. Brianna reached out for his hand.

“It’s gonna be OK,” Bree reassured.

Jamie nodded, and curled that one-sided smiled up his face.

“Keep telling me that,” he entreated, garnering himself another hug.

Jamie took in a deep breath in an attempt to stave off the tears he could feel coming on. He reluctantly broke their hug.
“I’ve…got those plans you wanted – for Lallybroch. I made the drawings after I…reacquired the land in the early eighties. I always intended to fix the place up myself…but I couldna think of livin’ there without yer mam.”

Jamie looked emotionally raw, and Bree could see it, but wasn’t sure if he wanted it acknowledged. He was usually emotionally controlled, inscrutable, but so much had changed in Scotland, for both of them. Bree took the chance.

“It’s OK for you to cry, if you need to.”

His tears flowed as his smile filled his face. Bree leaned in yet again and put her arms around his neck.

“It is going to be OK,” Bree reiterated.

~~~~~

Claire walked into the hospital, Jamie reluctantly being towed behind her.

“You wanted me to make this appointment, and you said you wanted to be here,” she stressed, looking back over her shoulder at him.

He nodded and gulped.

“I do want to be here…”

“Please don’t look so scared, Jamie. We’ll be OK. I have a good feeling about this. I’ve even stopped being sick already, just since earlier this week.”

Jamie looked rather green himself, sick with worry. The elevator did little to make Jamie feel less queasy, but he continued to escort Claire to her appointment. Claire was well known in these halls, being stopped more than once on her way down the hall.
“Dr. Fraser, lookin’ good,” one of nurses she worked closely with greeted her with.

“Heard you snuck off and got hitched – is that him?” she hooted, ogling Jamie.

“Nice catch.”

She moved down the hall, continuing to admire Jamie from every angle.

“Don’t worry, she doesn’t bite,” Claire reassured.

Jamie sighed deeply, rather from relief or anguish was indistinguishable. Claire seemed calm on the outside, but she was quite nervous. They were squeezing each other’s hands until the tips of their fingers turned white.

Once they were called into an exam room, Claire sat on the table and Jamie paced the short length of the room a number of times, then finally sat in the low chair to Claire’s left, and bent his head between his knees, gulping for air, and praying for his nerves to settle. As soon as Jamie saw the white coat of Dr. Janet MacInnes, he bolted for the bathroom just inside the door, and vomited.

“Is he OK?” the doctor asked, approaching Claire’s location.

“He’s caught my morning sickness,” she joked, getting a knowing smile from her doctor.

“Not uncommon – a lot of husbands manifest symptoms when their wives get pregnant.”

“So, I am pregnant then?” Claire sought to confirm.

“One hundred percent positive,” she said, placing a hand on Claire’s shoulder.

Jamie came feebly across the room, and thudded into the seat he’d been in before his urgent dash.
“As I was just telling your wife, congratulations, you are expecting. Looks like you two celebrated Samhain, then. November first is the probable date of conception.”

Jamie’s head came up when the doctor said ‘Samhain’. Claire took it as an indication he was paying attention.

“Jamie, this is my doctor, and one of my best friends here at the hospital. Janet MacInnes, I’d like you to meet Jamie Fraser.”

He reached out for her hand and she returned a tight, strong shake.

“Is this your first baby, then?” she asked of Jamie.

“No, he’s Brianna’s father too,” Claire interjected.

A slow smile came over Dr. MacInnes’ face.

“Really?”

Claire smiled and nodded quickly, taking Jamie’s hand into her own, and then looked back to her doctor.

“We…got separated – I mean literally, physically separated, not because we didn’t want to be together…so Jamie was…unable to be with me when I was pregnant with Brianna. The idea of me being pregnant worries him…and this wasn’t exactly planned, so…”

“Well, I expect when the shock wears off, you’ll remember what you’ll need to do, and you can help him get up to speed. Granted, though, twenty years on you’ll have some new choices to make.”

“Don’t I know it,” Claire retorted.
Jamie turned his eyes to her, horrified look on his face.

“What new choices?” he choked out.

Claire and the doctor smirked at each other.

~~~~~~

Armed with pamphlets and timelines and suggestions for vaccinations, Jamie and I headed back to my office. He was quiet.

“Well, at least we have a few months to get ready,” I offered to comfort Jamie.

“Aye,” Jamie whispered, nearly to himself.

He hadn’t looked up since he landed in the chair.

“Are you…sorry…that I’m pregnant?” I asked matter of fact.

Jamie stood quickly.

“No, no never sorry, God,” poured out of him as he took my hands.

“Just…” He stared at my belly.

“Like I told you when we were at Lallybroch…I will try to put my fears aside,” he looked up into my eyes, “But I fear it willna come easily.”

I kissed him softly. Even his lips were cold, chilled by his fear.
“We can do this…and this time, we’ll be together.”

Jamie tried to smile, and he drew me tight to his chest.

We shared a nice, if subdued, lunch together before he left me to finish my day at the hospital. He’d passed some of his fear on to me, it seemed, for a feeling of dread tried to drag me down all afternoon.

Though I am not one to turn to God routinely, I found myself praying that this pregnancy was uneventful, and that Jamie would overcome the almost paralyzing fear I could see in his eyes.

“Don’t hurt him anymore,” I whispered with my head bowed.

~~~~~

I came into the Leoch room to find Jamie happily staring off into space. Whatever he was calling to mind, it was clearly pleasurable. I stood watching him, his peaceful demeanor washing over me.

“Yes?”

“I wonder,” he spoke, “when the doctor said it happened on Samhain? Did you wonder which time? Where we were? The bed…or the hearth?”

“Do you think it makes a difference?”

“Och, probably not, but I’d like to know, so I can remember everything from the very beginning.”

“It’s entirely possible we were having breakfast when it actually happened – or it might have been while you were at the billiards table, for that matter. Pregnancy is not instantaneous.”

“Oh?”

“No. Even sperm as determined as yours need time to get the job done.”
Jamie laughed lightly.

I took this as a good sign. Jamie’s mood had lightened considerably since he’d left the hospital. He was even seeming almost happy about the baby, or at least happy about how the baby came to be.

~~~~~~

“Whatcha up to there, Sassenach?” Jamie asked.

“Letting Bree know our news,” I hummed happily as I typed.

“Are you ready to be a big sister, Bree?”

I added a winking emoji to the end and sent my message.

Moments later the phone peeped an incoming message tone.

“What’d she say?”

“Well, I asked Bree if she was ready to be a big sister, and she replied, ‘As long as you don’t expect me to baby-sit…ever’ – and then a string of emojis – and no, I don’t know what they mean all strung together like that, but I can sense a theme.”

Jamie kissed me on the temple.

“She’ll change her mind someday.”

“What makes you say that?” I replied with some shock. “Not every woman wants children, and Bree has never shown any interest in that direction.”

“She’s also never been in love,” Jamie said, matter of fact, almost challenging me.
“So you think some man is going to come into her life and change her profoundly? That suddenly Bree will want a dozen kids of her own?”

“Well, not a dozen, but…surely…”

I glared at him.

“She’d be a fierce mother,” Jamie intuited, smiling broadly now.

“But it would have to be her idea, not something she does to please someone else.”

“Aye,” Jamie nodded, momentarily dropping his head.

“Besides, we don’t even know what being immortal might mean in that department. Infertility can be heart-breaking. What if she can’t…”

“I’m immortal, and I’ve made a baby with you, Sassenach.”

“But you aren’t growing the baby inside you, Jamie.”

He nodded sadly.

“We’ve gone far afield with this conversation. Bree is not thinking about having a baby. Lallybroch is her baby right now, and giving birth to that will be plenty.”

“Aye, Sassenach, it will…I gave her my copy of the plans for Lallybroch when she was here last, and I could see in her eyes she was…starting to take to the idea more and more, but she reminded me that she’d not be here, and I believe now I am the one torn about her leaving Boston.”
Having a bit of writers’ block right now, but I got a few pages done out. I thought better a little something than making you all wait until the new year - so to celebrate my birthday (tomorrow) and all the holidays in the offing, here’s a short chapter to tide you over. Thanks for reading, and commenting, and bookmarking, oh my!!

After a weekend of pouring over the drawings of Lallybroch Jamie had given her, Brianna was a mix of emotions. But what she was mostly was intimidated by the whole idea, and this was something she needed an outside perspective to straighten out. She carefully furled up the hand-drawn plans and slipped them into a protective tube for transport. Her program advisor had always leveled with her, starting with some of the attitudes her fellow students were likely to have until Bree proved herself. She’d appreciated his honesty, seeing him as a bit of a father figure, and he quickly saw her intelligence and the potential she possessed.

Bree knocked on his office door.

“Brianna?” he said in surprise, looking up and pulling his glasses off, placing them on his desk.

“Hi Professor, can I get an opinion on something?”

“Sure, have to decide between offers?” he asked, knowing she had applied to many prestigious architecture firms.

“Not quite…actually, I’ve been offered an opportunity to restore a Scottish estate, and I need a… un-jaundiced perspective.”

“I should have known you’d not take the conventional path, and have a job lined up before you even graduate – are these the plans?”
Bree nodded as she un-shouldered the transport tube and popped its lid out. With a gentle thump, she tapped the end of the tube to dislodge the drawings, and unfurled them across the drawing table. Her professor stood and ambled over to the laid-out papers, replacing his glasses.

“Let’s have a look,” he offered.

“The top sheet is the main house – there’s an overview of the entire property on the next page.”

“These are beautifully rendered,” the professor commented.

“My father drew them,” she proudly pronounced.

“You mean step-dad?”

“No, I don’t. The wedding I went to, that I needed to reschedule things for, was for my mom and real dad.”

“Is he a designer or architect?”

“No, just skilled in many fields,” Bree replied, her cheeks pinking up, “And I’ve barely scratched the surface of what he knows,” she smirked as she shook her head.

The professor puffed a little laugh and went back to looking over the plans.

“This is a nice spread – who owns it?”

Bree hesitated, not wanting to color his opinion, or make an assumption of nepotism.

“Um…my father – it’s…my ancestral home. I’ve already contracted with an architect in Scotland who can keep me abreast of all the local regs,” she added quickly, trying to show she was taking this seriously.
“Looks like you already have the ball rolling, what do want me to say?”

“I’ve gotten advice from so many people about this, but…each one has a vested interest. You’ve never sugar-coated anything before. I need your honesty – does this project have a chance in hell?”

Bree stood unmoving, her eyes un-flinchingly focused on her professor.

“I’m not sure I’ve even seen you this serious, Brianna, or this sure. I noticed your growing confidence last semester. Can I assume this has something to do with your father being back in your life?”

“In part…I’ve had to deal with…a number of changes in a very short time. I guess it’s helped me put things in perspective, and showed me what I’m made of.”

“I told you at the beginning of year two, the only thing I thought was missing was your drive – that your technique and recall were flawless, but that I didn’t know if you had the drive to succeed in this field. Well, you just showed me. Not only is this project feasible, if you take that attitude into your career, almost every one of your fellow graduates will be asking you for a job within a decade. You came in here like a wholly different person today.”

Bree’s eyes sparkled as she blushed.

“That’s because I am,” she boldly retorted.

~~~~~

“Jamie, have you had any inoculations?” Claire asked.

The question came out of left field for Jamie, who was lost in his own mind, absentely stroking Claire’s still flat stomach.

“Um…aye – full military panel - twice.”
“Anything since 1945?”

“Nah. Pretty sure I can’t catch anything, so…”

“Yes, but nothing says you can’t carry a disease – unfortunately, you can’t get most of the shots while I’m pregnant without risking the baby. I swear the number of inoculations has quadrupled since Brianna was a baby. But we’ll work something out.”

Jamie furrowed his brows.

“You mean, you expect me to be jabbed for a host of diseases I most likely canna contract?”

“Better safe than sorry, Jamie. This baby…all things considered, is a miracle. This will not happen again, and I’m doing everything in my power to give birth to a healthy baby.”

“Of course, Sassenach. We both want that.”

Claire nestled more closely against Jamie’s body.

“What about names?” Claire warmly toned, “have you thought what we might name this one? There are so many family names we could choose among, or we could strike out on our own, and choose something original.”

Jamie hummed like he was thinking.

“If it’s a girl, we could name her Janet or Jenny in honor of your sister, or Ellen for your mother,” Claire suggested, sliding her hand over his and working her fingers between his.

“What about Venus?” Claire offered hoping to spark Jamie to respond.

“Would her middle name be ‘flytrap’, then?” Jamie humorously replied.
“I like Murtaugh.”

“For a girl?” Claire questioned in disbelief.

“She’d be the only one, to be sure,” Jamie inflected as an eyebrow raised along with a smirk.

“What if it’s a boy? What would you want to name our son?”

Jamie chuckled.

“We’ll not have to worry on that account Sassenach, it’s not gonna be a boy, we only make girls together,” he said, and then leaned in for a kiss.

Although it seemed to be done to put off the conversation, Jamie’s kiss didn’t dissuade Claire one bit.

“I promised to name Bree after your father, but would you want to name a boy Brian?”

“No, never. That name belongs to our lass. I’d never want her to think I wished her to be a boy, or that she was not good enough to bear the name of my father…Isn’t it a bit soon to be discussing names anyway, Sassenach?”

“The time goes by faster than you think,” Claire advised.

“I imagine it will,” Jamie replied in a whisper, and he moved to wrap his arms completely around Claire.

~~~~~

After a quite lengthy discussion with her program advisor, and a whole day’s worth of classes, Brianna set to work making a technical schematic from Jamie’s drawings of Lallybroch, and
getting it loaded onto her computer so she could freely manipulate the images. She wanted to have several variations of her ideas fully entrenched in her mind before she showed them to Jamie, in case he didn’t like her first iteration. She already had some concrete ideas of what she saw in certain areas, but she wanted contingency plans so she wouldn’t get flustered and give in if he challenged her vision. She also wanted to be prepared in case Wake contacted her about the drawings she’d sent him. Since he was actually on site, his input could prove vital.

Things were happening so quickly. It hadn’t even been a month since Bree had said she would restore Lallybroch, but there was no turning back now. By the time the next movie day rolled around, Bree was happy to give in to Jamie’s suggestion that they watch The Princess Bride. Jamie could see the tension slip away from Brianna as she watched and nestled against him. It helped him relax as well. While Bree was by his side, he was content.

“Stay ‘til your mam gets home?” Jamie requested of her once the movie was over.

“Sure – I could help with the supper,” Bree offered.

The smile that blossomed on Jamie’s face lit the room.

“I’d like that, and Claire will be happy to see you. You’ve not talked face to face since…we knew for sure,” he said with some difficulty.

“It will all be OK,” Brianna reassured, remembering Jamie’s plea that she say that too him as often as possible.

“You remembered – thank-ye. It helps, as does having you around.”

Bree smiled at that thought, but behind her smile, a level of concern was growing – would she be able to leave Jamie and her mother when it came time to return to Lallybroch…and would it be safe if she did?

~~~~~

Bree’s fears settled to the back of her mind once more as she and Jamie began to work on dinner. She knew she couldn’t ‘solo’ on preparing anything other than a couple of recipes Fiona had drilled her through – and even then she felt tentative, but she could survive.
“So, have you been workin’ on the plans…for Lallybroch?” Jamie asked.

“Yeah, I have. Would you…I’ve got some ideas I really like, but…”

“Brianna – lass – doona fear that your vision doesna match mine.”

Bree nodded and pressed her lips together.

“I was gonna wait until I had the 3-D images done, but…I’m dying to show you what I’ve been working on. I’ve got it all on my computer now. We could…go over it after we eat.”

“Aye, I’d love that.”

~~~

“Brianna,” Claire said with a broad, welcoming smile. “I’m glad you stayed.”

She gave her daughter a warm embrace.

“You’ll get sick of seeing me I’ll be over here so much.”

“Never,” Claire replied, shaking her head as she held onto Brianna’s shoulders.

“Like she said, never,” Jamie reiterated as he came over and kissed Claire on the back of the neck.

Claire turned and smiled at Jamie, giving him a solid kiss on the lips. She smiled solicitously at her husband, telling him with her eyes the day had been fine, but she had missed his touch.

“Why don’t the two of you relax - I’ll finish the supper,” Jamie suggested.
“You know he won’t take ‘no’ for an answer,” Claire stated to Brianna. “I’ve been on my feet all day, why don’t we go down to the bedroom and find my slippers?” she suggested to Bree.

The two of them made their way down to the Leoch room. Claire marched right in the door, but Brianna entered hesitantly. Claire was too focused on finding her slippers and soothing her feet to notice at first, but saw Brianna stiffen up as she came into the room.

“What’s this about?” Claire asked, taking one of Bree’s balled up hands into her palm.

“I feel like I don’t belong in here – like I’m an anachronism here. This is your special room with Jamie.”

“Non-sense – you helped create this place - ”

“But as soon as it was complete…Mom…are you two going to be OK if…when I leave? Jamie’s told me he’s scared – he wants my reassurance. Should I put restoring Lallybroch on hold?”

“Jamie’s nervous about the baby – the past is still haunting him. He’s convinced something bad is going to happen, but I feel it in my bones – this baby is a gift – a miracle – and I don’t want you putting off your life because of fear – Jamie’s, or your own. We’ll be fine – Jamie will be fine. I appreciate your concern – I love you for it, and the way you and Jamie have forged a relationship, but you have a life to live waiting for you. Just come back for the birth?”

“Of course I will! My little brother or sister needs to know who came first – the pecking order.”

“Very funny, sweetie…Jamie will work through his fears – there’s nothing your Dad and I can’t get through as long as we’re together, and you can count on that. I’ve never known someone with a stronger will…except you,” Claire said with a tilt and nod of her head.

Bree laughed as she smiled and moved in to embrace her mom.

“I’ve missed talking with you lately,” Claire whispered, “Everything’s been a whirlwind.”
“Like I said, I’ll be around so much before I leave, you’ll get sick of me, and just because I’ll be in Scotland, don’t think I won’t call and skype and make a virtual pest of myself!”

“I certainly hope so.”

~~~~~

The three of us headed down to the media room after Jamie fed us dinner. Bree had promised to show him her preliminary layout for the restoration of Lallybroch, and I was interested in what she had come up with. I had tooled around that house as it had been, and remembered the layout, but there was room for improvement, or at least modernization.

At first Brianna set up her laptop on the table in front of the sectional which held the remote tower. She was leaned forward in front of it as she typed and ran her fingers over the touch pad to bring up the page she wanted to share. With a deep breath, Bree pulled the computer onto her knees and set the screen back at a broad angle.

“I know it’s a little small, but I can expand anything you want a closer look at,” Brianna said to both of us, the hopefulness obvious in both her face and voice.

I leaned in, clinging to Jamie’s shoulder as he studied the screen. For a long time, he didn’t react one way or another, and I could see Bree starting to fidget out of the corner of my eyes. I hummed in his ear and he looked at me long enough to catch the signal from my eyes.

“Um…well…it certainly is different,” he commented.

“You don’t like it,” Brianna surmised from his tone.

“It’s fine – it’s good – inspired even. I’d never have thought…it’s a far more practical use of the space for today.” Jamie looked up and smiled at Bree. “It’s beautiful,” he assured her. “You don’t need my approval, though.”

“But you need to like it too,” she implored.
“Brianna, I’ve known this house as it was since I was a bairn, but...clearly you have a vision of what you want, and what will work. Trust yourself,” he affirmed, taking her hands into his. “Whatever you do, it will be a home when you’re done.”

~~~~~

Bree found herself anticipating Wake’s next contact, but everything they talked about was purely hypothetical until she settled on her final plans, and until the permits came through, both of which were proving difficult. But their conversations were lively and varied, and often lasted far longer than either of them had intended. And she always came away from their talks physically exhausted, but with her mind racing. Brianna thought it had to do with the time difference and scheduling of the calls, and her excitement about the project, but she couldn’t explain the tingly feeling that lingered long after each long-distance communication.

Movie day with Jamie was joined by weekends spent in their entirety with Jamie and Claire, lazy breakfasts when time allowed, and hours of just being together in the same room. Bree always brought a copy of the Lallybroch plans with her, either on paper or on her computer and she and Jamie spent many hours with their heads together, Jamie often waxing about his memories of how the house was laid out originally, often leaving Brianna in a quandary because he would speak so fondly of the places that affected his childhood.

Jamie soaked in all the togetherness, forcing himself to remember everything in minute detail, all too aware of how quickly time moved on. It was like they were creating a microcosm of Brianna’s youth, letting Jamie experience what it might have been like to raise her, and of what a continuous marriage to Claire might have brought. Brianna’s constant presence and reassurances were keeping Jamie on an even keel, but making the upcoming separation far more difficult to think about. Bree had put in the paperwork for her early graduation, and was already looking into cheap plane fares, as well as packing anything she wouldn’t need before spring, so she could begin shipping her life, piece by piece, to Scotland.

Despite all the togetherness, there was one thing Brianna kept to herself, and did in private – talking to Wake. She liked being alone with him – even if he was thousands of miles away.

And so the new year began, but this idyllic fantasy couldn’t go on forever. Soon, Claire would begin to show, and Brianna would have to go, but Jamie tried not to think about it.

~~~~~
Making A House; Making A Home

Chapter Notes

In the writing of the latest chapter, I passed the 500 page mark, although you have only read about 330, so rest assured, there is a lot more story coming your way as I tweak and complete chapter by chapter, and I still have many gaps to fill in, so this thing may end up at 1000 pages before I'm done. Thank-you for your patience and continued readership, because an even bigger milestone is on the horizon as this story closes in on 10,000 reads - which I find almost unbelievable, and most humbling. Thank-you all.

Making A House; Making A Home

The laptop sat open on her bed, books and papers sat scattered around her as Brianna drowsed. She’d been working diligently all afternoon, but her eyelids were refusing to cooperate, and she drifted into dream. The green eyes moved in. He kissed her again and again and she melted to her back, pulling him down tighter. She’d let him do anything he wanted…the computer signaled an incoming message.

Bree’s eyes opened and her heart pumped furiously with the rush of adrenaline from both the computer awakening her and the dream she had found herself in for that moment. Ever since returning to Boston, whenever her mind wandered, he was there. She’d left without saying goodbye, afraid she’d do something she’d regret if she found herself alone with Wake MacKenzie, at least without several thousand miles of physical separation between the two of them.

She gathered the papers, pushing them out of the way as she rolled to her stomach on the bed, and set the computer up in front of herself as she opened the window on the Skype call from Scotland.

“Hey!” Brianna emitted as Wake’s face came up on the screen, breaking up at times like he’d
turned into Max Headroom.

She propped herself up on her elbows, unaware that the angle she had her screen tilted at left Wake looking well into her cleavage, and silently praying and wishing that one day he’d be face to face with her breasts in person once more.

“How goes the approvals? Are we close to beginning any actual work on the house?”

“I hold in my hand the official permission to begin any needed structural repairs on the house and out buildings on the property known as Lallybroch,” Wake reported with a smiled. “How are you coming along on the final plans? Should I be expecting the blueprints any time soon?”

“Not yet, I’m afraid. My dad keeps trying to tell me how it all was when he…I mean…the way it was when it was built, but so many changes have been made, there’s just no way to take it back to its inception.”

Bree got an itch on her calf and unconsciously moved to scratch it, making it look like she’d been yanked away, and with her head off to the side, that former cleavage view was replaced by a waist down shot showing the snug jeans that traced her form.

Wake began to blush slightly, feeling quite the voyeur.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Sorry – I got an itch. My roomie offered to do a few items of my laundry, and I forgot her soap makes me break out,” Bree rather over-shared, rolling back, her face once again visible, along with the top curve of each breast.

“Sorry to hear that – there’s nothing worse than an itch that canna be scratched.”

Bree smiled and blushed at his comment, wondering if he meant the innuendo she could hear in his word choice.
“So…” Bree breathed out, hoping to find some other reason to keep him talking.

Wake smiled back, the screen freezing for a moment on an image of Wake that made Brianna’s mouth go dry.

“When do ye think we can expect you back here to supervise?” Wake asked hopefully.

“I…I graduate in April,” she informed him, “I think I told you that…or did I tell your mom? Anyway, I can’t leave until I get all my classes done, but I’m looking forward to getting back to Lallybroch…besides, there’s a lot of work to be done on the house before I come. I want to be able to live there.”

“It’ll be a tall order, getting enough of the house done in time…but I’m sure my Mam and Da would find room for you with them in the meantime. We could take over the study with the plans!” he broadly declared.

Brianna laughed, and it was music to his ears. He wanted to crawl through the screen and lay atop her, plying her with kisses.

“Well then…” Wake spoke, prolonging their interaction, “Have a good Valentine’s.”

Bree curled a tress of her hair around her finger as she bit her lower lip. She felt immeasurably shy at his mention of Valentine’s Day. She’d been waiting for hours for his call, centering her Valentine’s Day around what he might say, and just hearing his voice.

“Well, I wouldn’a want to keep you from…any plans ye might have,” Wake said in an attempt to fill the silence.

“I…I don’t have any plans,” she hesitantly replied, chills marching the length of her spine.

“Too bad we’re on different continents…I’d have taken you for a celebratory dinner – for getting the permits, of course.”
“Of course!...That would have been nice.”

They smiled as they stared at each other through the computer screen.

Brianna crossed her arms across her chest, hoping to obscure her body’s reaction. Thinking about Wake taking her to dinner had Bree thinking about what a date with Wake might be like, and about being in his arms, and about how far she’d let him go, or if she’d stop him at all if he made a move on her. The blush on her cheeks was readable.

“Wake, Dinner!” Bree heard faintly in the background of the transmission.

“Was that your mom I hear?”

“Aye – I’m at the manse – better connection here.”

Again they stared at each other in silence for a moment.

“Um…” Bree toned, “Tell them I said hi.”

“Sure thing. Until next time,” Wake burred.

She saw his hand reach forward and click off the connection, a beautiful shot of his eyelashes and eyelids half closed as he looked down, frozen as the final frame of their video conversation.

~~~~~

I had been thinking about tonight all day. I could only imagine what a romantic man like Jamie would have waiting for us this Valentine’s night. My body was tingling with anticipation, and the feelings of desire were running rampant. I couldn’t wait to get home.

Jamie has been extra careful with me ever since the pregnancy was confirmed. And while I appreciate his want to be gentle, once the morning sickness passed, I wanted to enjoy being a newlywed. We’d had some pretty
amazing pregnant sex before,
and I only hoped I could coax Jamie into a demonstrative display of carnal enjoyment.

Jamie welcomed me with a breath-stealing kiss and I melted into his embrace.

“Happy Valentine’s day,” I hummed as I clung to him to stay upright.

He toted me into the kitchen and set me down at the table, quickly presenting me with a glass of mulled cider – it was non-alcoholic, but it had a nice spicy kick to it.

“Um,” I exhaled, placing the drained glass down.

“That was quick,” Jamie quipped, “Refill?”

“Yes please, and I’ll sip the next one,” I answered him.

He handed me back the refilled glass and sat next to me, wrapping his arm around mine with a filled glass in his own hand.

We carefully each took a sip from our own glass, having to crane our necks slightly, and awkwardly pull against each other to make it work. I smiled at him, hoping the whole night would feel like this.

We lingered at the table, taking in our meal at a leisurely pace. I cast a glance at Jamie I hoped would convey how I wanted the rest of the night to unfold. I reached out for his hand across the table, and I know he felt the same surge of energy when we touched because all the hairs on his hand stood up.

“Dessert can wait,” I appealed, and quickly moved to place myself in his lap.

I could feel his heart pounding, but there was a feeling of…hesitation.

“Jamie, I won’t break.”

“But…the baby.”
I touched my finger to his lips.

“Nothing you’ve done to me while having sex ever put any of our children in jeopardy,” I assured him.

I caressed Jamie’s cheek and leaned in for a long kiss. While he was still exhaling from that kiss, I stood and grabbed him by the hand, almost skipping toward the Leoch room, and Jamie was providing no resistance. He was caught up in my wake, following me through sheer instinct.

As we entered the room, he used the hand I had used to lead him to keep me from advancing, spinning me back against the shoulder width of wall next to the doorway, and pinning me there with his full weight.

“Yes,” I hissed as we tasted each other.

I felt myself being undressed, amazed yet again that he could be so delicate with hands that were also such formidable weapons. The bed greeted us, enveloped us.

Getting Jamie to forget his worries had brought me contentment, and Jamie exhaustion. He was splayed across the bed like he had escaped a Renaissance painting, finally able to relax after centuries in a fixed pose. I hoped it would be the beginning of Jamie being able to enjoy and share in this pregnancy without focusing on his fears. I need Jamie to get me through this.

~~~~~

Claire was sitting leisurely at the little round table under the window in the Leoch room. Jamie was still sleeping off the previous night’s activities, and it made Claire smirk as she looked over at him. She’d thought ahead, recently stocking the Leoch room with tea and coffee so all she’d have to do is set a kettle in the fireplace. Being February in Boston, Jamie always got the fire roaring late in the afternoon, and there were useful coals left behind in the morning for heating the kettle.
The room was a bit chilly, so Claire draped her lap with a blanket as she looked over a pile of forms on the table.

“I can’t believe how many forms there are,” she mumbled to herself, taking another sip of tea.

“CLAIRE?” a worried yell called out from the bed as Jamie woke and didn’t find her by his side.

His eyes were wide with fear until he saw her. He exhaled and unconsciously crossed himself.

“Are you alright?” Claire asked, seeing his distress.

“Nah – bad dream, and you werna in the bed. Why are you up so early?” Jamie inquired.

“Paperwork…our wishes for the baby’s delivery and care. We need to have this all decided.”

Jamie slunk out of the bed and came to stand behind Claire, feeling her warmth giving him solace.

“I’m sure you want your input, but I do intend to send the cord blood to a public bank, so it can help babies and children in medical need.”

“Always thinking of others,” he said warmly, wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips tightly together.

“Join me in going over these?” Claire lightly pleaded.

“In all things medical, I trust your judgment, Sassenach.”

He kissed her on the temple, lingering a moment, taking several deep breaths with his face pressed against the top of her head.

“Come back to bed ‘til the alarm sounds…please?” he added to his request.

Claire stood and turned to face Jamie, her hands reaching out to his chest.
“You’re like ice,” she said with concern, pulling him in tight. She towed him back to the bed; tucked the blankets up around Jamie. She pulled the curtains closed, reaching across Jamie to close his side, and then snuggled into his embrace.

“Sorry I worried you,” Claire gently spoke as her fingers moved like tendrils, nearly becoming embedded in Jamie’s flesh.

Jamie’s giant hands covered as much of her skin as they could, holding her firmly to him.

“How do you say it? Leannain, doona fash, I have you now.”

~~~~~

With Claire gone for the day, Jamie found himself tidying up around the house, following the trail they’d made back from the kitchen to the Leoch room. He straightened up the bed clothes, refolded the blanket Claire had shielded herself in at the table.

He did his best to ignore the papers on the table. He took the kettle upstairs to refill the water, and the teacup to give it a rinse, bringing it back down and placing it on the hearth. The room was all set to right, but Jamie couldn’t leave it, finding a wrinkle in the blankets, an off pleat in the curtains. He’d stop and look back at the table after each readjustment of the room.

He picked up one of the papers, read it, one by one down the pile, finally lifting the last sheet off the table. His left eyebrow went up and he set jaw, seemingly incensed as he reread what he’d seen.

“Over my dead body,” he proclaimed, turning and shoving the corner of the paper into the dying embers of the fireplace.

~~~~~

Claire’s face held a crumpled expression as she returned to the kitchen after swapping out her shoes for slippers and day
clothes for something more cozy.

“Hmmff,” she exhaled, scuffing across the floor. “One of the papers is missing.”

Jamie nodded, anger boiling in his chest after spending the whole day accruing pressure.

“Aye, it is.”

“What did you do?” Claire questioned flatly.

“I burned it.”

“We needed that – now I’ll have to get another copy,” she told him, brows furrowing.

“I’ll not sign it, and I don’t know how you would even consider it – you are willing to let them… mutilate…”

“What? – that was the page about circumcision,” she said calmly after a heated opening.

“Aye, and I’ll not allow it,” he spat out, “it is a painful and unnecessary barbarism.”

“I was going to talk to you before anything got signed – but this morning you said you trusted me in all things medical – besides a few weeks ago you were convinced we only have girls.”

“Well… that’s true, but I don’t want it to be true only due to the slip of a knife!” he refuted, shifting uncomfortably.

“Jamie…I wouldn’t have given my permission,” she soothed, turning and touching her hand to his chest. “I agree with you – it’s not medically necessary, and we don’t have religious considerations. But you could have talked to me before you shoved it in the fire – it was two-sided,” she said with a growing smile.

Jamie’s ear tips and cheeks flushed quickly. He tried to hold a straight face, but soon smirked an embarrassed grin.

“Sorry… forgive me?”
“Forgiven,” Claire purred back at him.

~~~~~

When this week’s movie was at an end, Bree sighed and sat forward.

“What’s the trouble?” Jamie asked, also sitting forward, shoulder to shoulder with Brianna, his hands pinned together between his knees.

“We’ve only got a few more weeks of this…before I leave. It feels like it’s flying by,” she revealed, her voice a cross between a reverent whisper and a tearful confession. “But I was wondering…I have some…things…stuff I won’t be taking to Scotland with me, and I was wondering if I could bring it here for safe keeping in the meantime.”

“What kind of things?” Jamie asked out of curiosity.

“My record collection for one – I have copies of everything on my computer and MP3 player, and it’s just too much to take with me. Stuff like that…”

“I’ll put it in the treasure room,” Jamie vowed, putting an arm around Bree’s shoulder.

As he held her to his side, he had a thought.

“You’re here half the week as it is…why don’t ye move in…full time?”

Bree slowly turned her face toward Jamie, seeing he was serious.

“I couldn’t…my roommates need my rent. I’m already leaving them short by moving to Scotland before the lease is up and I don’t want to put them in any more of a spot, and I’m gonna be on my own once I leave…”

Jamie nodded sympathetically.
“I understand – your own two feet.”

Brianna nodded, but her eyes betrayed her independent stance.

“I could bring the Wagoneer around to fetch the things you want kept.”

“That won’t be necessary. I can bring a couple of things at a time starting this weekend, if that’s OK?”

“Aye, it’s fine.”

“OK…I actually have to get going – tell Mom I love her?”

“Without hesitation,” he said, nodding.

Jamie escorted Bree up the ramp and to the front door, keeping an arm around her back, the two of them playfully bumping into each other as they walked.

“I love you,” Bree breathed out, giving Jamie one more hug before she left. “See you on the weekend.”

The content smile was still on Jamie’s face when Claire got home.

~~~~~

Jamie spied Brianna struggling with an uncooperative backpack and a storage tub as she arrived for another weekend. Not even stopping to put on a coat, Jamie tapped down the stairs and took the tub from her grasp.

“Let me help you, there, lass,” Jamie happily offered.

He put the tub down in the foyer, waiting for Bree to catch up with him.

“You toted that all the way here? You are a strong lass!”

“It wasn’t that bad,” she down-played with a shake of her head.
“Shall we take it to the treasure room, find it a place?”

“Sure,” she shyly peeped, “Lead the way.”

Jamie took the tote back into his grasp, and led them to his treasure room. Brianna noticed the small ‘shipping’ coffin as she entered the room, smiling at the memories it begat. She found herself looking around at the different items decking the walls and standing about, and finally looked back at her father. He was crouched next to the tub she’d brought, the lid in his left hand as he reached in with his right.

He took the top album sleeve out and smiled as he saw the image of himself with the rooster comb hair style and the square microphone cradled in one of his massive hands.

“You know, I have that microphone…and the boots,” he added, cracking a broader smile and looking up behind himself to the left to see Brianna.

Bree crouched to his side.

“Those boots are something,” she declared.

“They’d likely fit ye,” he suggested, remembering the likeness of their feet.

“You think?” she brightly retorted.

“Sure – they’re yours if you like.”

“I’m not sure…I’m more a work boot person.”

“Och, those boots were remarkably sturdy, and I’m sure they’d serve you well.”

“I guess…it’s the color – I’m not sure I can pull off cherry red leather.”
“Bold boots for a bold lass.”

Bree blushed as she began to nod.

“I’ll try them.”

Jamie stood and went directly to where the boots were stowed. He took them in hand, gave them a loving brush, and

presented them to Brianna with a bow of his head.

“Thank-you,” she shyly replied.

~~~~~

Bree took her newly acquired boots and her backpack down to the media room where she’d been camping out on weekends.

She set the boots on the coffee table and looked at them like they were an exhibit in a museum – vintage Doc Martin boots,

greasy cherry red leather, circa 1980.

She thought about how many times she’d listened to the record by Threat of Thunder; Threat of Rain before she knew the

voice was that of her own father, and she dropped her head as she thought about the tragic end that befell the band, making

Joe MacLeod an orphan, and of her new friend Cassidly who had been lucky enough to have Jamie in her life from a very early

age. She sighed, feeling tears creep into the corners of her eyes.

She let it all wash over her, the tidal wave of knowledge that had pasted her to the sand since that day she walked in on her

mother with Jamie laid atop her. Brianna had done so much growing up since that day. She became content in the knowledge

that as awful as portions of what she went through were, it had had an overall positive effect on her life, and had lifted the

dark veil that had landed on her life when she was sixteen. She smiled as the tears washed her eyes out.
“I’m free…” she vocalized, “…And I’m ready.”

~~~~~

“When did you get those?” Claire asked as Brianna marched proudly into the kitchen wearing the cherry red doc martin boots,

“I’ve never seen those boots.”

“Actually, you have, but only in a picture – they’re on the album cover,” she turned and beamed a smile at Jamie, “He gave them to me,” she effusively informed her mother as she turned back to look at Claire.

Claire also beamed at Jamie, seeing yet another bond grow between her two favorite people in the world.

“How in the world do you…I thought you lost everything after a…resurrection.”

“Aye, but these weren’t on my person – our equipment and most of our belongings were on a different plane. It was…quite bittersweet to go through all of it. I saved very little from that life.”

“You saved a small boy from going down the wrong path. I think that’s far more important than the material things.”

Jamie’s expression was wistful as he came to take Claire into his arms to thank her for her words. They held each other tightly for a bit, Jamie soaking in the feel of her body against his. He then let her go and turned his attention back to Brianna.

“So they fit?” he asked.

“Perfectly…How do they look?” she asked in return.

“They suit you.”

Bree smiled.

“I wouldn’t have thought so, but they do, don’t they?” Bree admitted.
Just as Brianna was settling down in the media room, Claire dropped in for a visit, coming and sitting so she could draw

Brianna’s head into her lap.

“Mom?” Bree questioned.

“Shh, I just wanted…I needed to…mother you.”

“Something you need to talk about?”

“I thought I had prepared myself to let you go. Our time together over the summer was supposed to let me launch you into

adulthood, but in reality…”

“Do you need me to reassure you that everything will be OK?” Bree said with a hint of humor.

“Yes, please, I would like that,” Claire concurred, brushing her fingers through Bree’s hair.

“It will be OK.” Bree said, looking up into her mother’s face.

“I remember when you were young, even if it was hours after your bedtime when I got home, often you’d make your way to

my bed after the sitter would leave – that’s what this feels like, only this time you have the calm voice of reason.”

Claire kissed Bree on the forehead.

“Alright, I’ll let you sleep now,” Claire hummed, “Love you.”

“Love you too – both of you.”

Claire slipped from the room as silently as she had come, reassured, relaxed, and ready to curl herself around Jamie.
Bree finally made it back to the apartment after a full Monday. She was feeling a little down after leaving her parents’ company once again, wondering if she should have taken Jamie up on his offer to move in, despite her want to keep her independence.

For a moment she felt paralyzed, stuck between what she wanted to do and what she thought she should do.

“Roommates meeting,” Bree heard after a rapping on her door, “Bree are you free?”

“Coming,” she called back, making her way into the common room.

“I’m assuming everyone knows Bree will be leaving us before the lease is up,” said roomie number one.

They all nodded.

“Well, I know someone who’s in need of a place to stay, but I wanted to run it by all of you first, especially you, Bree. This person, friend, needs a place now –I don’t want you to think I’m trying to throw you out…but…I wondered…You are staying with your parents half the time now…”

Bree smiled and nodded.

“I’ll have to call and ask, but I’m sure my parents would be thrilled if I spent the next few months with them before I leave. I can be out by mid-week if they say yes. Will that do?” Brianna asked, secretly pleased with this turn of events.

“You’re not sore about this?” roomie number two asked earnestly.

“No,” Bree simply answered with a shake of her head. “I’ll call them now.”

Brianna left the room to make her call, coming back less than three minutes later, laughing.

“All set,” Bree chuckled as she returned.
“What’s funny?” roomie one asked.

“My father would have come tonight. He’s so excited…I am going to miss you guys. I know we’ve never been really close, but living here gave me what I needed to feel like an adult, so thank-you.”

The gathered roommates all stood stunned as one by one, Brianna gave them each a hug, and then headed back to her room to begin packing.

~~~~~

Jamie dashed from the kitchen to the Leoch room, catching Claire changing into her relaxed evening wear. He grabbed her up into his arms and spun her around.

“She’s coming home,” he exclaimed, “Brianna is moving in with us until she leaves for Scotland.”

Jamie was in tears, and shaking with happiness as he placed Claire back on her feet.

“How did you manage that?” Claire asked with equal excitement, “I thought you said she turned down your offer again?”

“She had…but, someone else needs the room – can take over her rent right away. She asked me to help get her belongings!”

“That’s wonderful, oh Jamie, I know it’s only a couple of months…”

Jamie took hold of Claire by the elbows.

“Our daughter will be living with us – two weeks or two months, it matters not. She’ll be under our roof until she takes up under the roof at Lallybroch. We can love her up, fortify her with hugs and kisses.”

Claire didn’t have any words to answer Jamie with, but she smiled and searched his eyes, caught up in the overwhelming love she saw emanating from his every pore. They were both breathing hard, so much feeling having come to the surface in a


hurry.

The Leoch room amplified their reaction, and soon they were locked in a naked embrace, their joy uncontainable.

With a sigh from Jamie, it ended.

“I’d stay here for hours, but the supper needs my intervention if we are to eat tonight. Come up when ye can.”

With a kiss Jamie slithered away, leaving both of them content in the knowledge that their daughter was coming home.

~~~~~~

Movie day also became moving day this week, and Jamie wasted no time in getting ready and having the Wagoneer sitting in front of Bree’s apartment.

“You weren’t kidding,” roomie number one said, looking out the window, “Your dad is already waiting downstairs.”

Bree grinned and came up to the window her roommate was looking out.

“He’s been trying to get me to move in with them for months, but I thought I needed to stay here to prove I was an adult. I finally got smart enough to know better.”

Bree’s eyes were a little glassy as she fought back her tears.

“You have changed,” roomie number one said to Bree. “But I like who you’ve become.”

“Thank-you,” Bree answered with a nod.

“Can I give you a goodbye hug?”

“I’d like that,” Brianna said, opening her arms and enjoying a friendly embrace.
“Be good,” the roomie whispered as she let go.

“I will,” Bree assured her.

It took Jamie and Brianna less than a half hour to clear out Bree’s room, and all her belongings fit with room to spare into the back of the Jeep. The drive from the apartment to Griff’s house took longer than it had to remove Bree’s presence from her bedroom, and by lunch time she was moved in with her parents, and she sighed, happy to be home.

~~~~~

“Will that placement for the drawing table suit you?” Jamie asked as Bree came into the modern kitchen from the corner of the foyer where her new work station had been established.

“It’s fine,” she replied, not completely convincingly.

“You sure? We could find someplace else – someplace more private?”

“No, really, I don’t want to be shut away, but I do need to make some final decisions for the plans. Wake needs the completed blueprints pretty soon.”

“I’ll only give suggestions when ye ask from now on, will that help?” Jamie asked.

“I am designing your house.”

Jamie nodded slowly, face scrunched as he thought how to reply.

“Aye, but…it will be your house as well – I want you to feel at home at Lallybroch. I know I’ve sent ye mixed messages, and I hate to think I’ve undermined your creative process…I’ll not say another word after this – make it a home for yourself. I don’t know if Claire and I will ever call Lallybroch home again, so make it your home, but leave some room for our visits,” he added with a tilt of his head and a lilt in his voice.
“Why do you think you and Mom won’t come back to Lallybroch?” Bree asked, a bit shocked.

“She’s…established here – her job…”

“Mom and I talked a lot about what she might do after I graduated, depending on where I wound up for work. She’s not wedded to Boston, not if she has a good enough reason to leave, and that was before you came back into her life, our lives.

And I know she loved being back in Scotland. Don’t assume you know what she’s thinking. So much is about to change.”

“Aye…,” Jamie said sadly, but a smile slowly crept up his face, “Perhaps we’ll make it to Lallybroch after all, but I leave it to you to make it a home again, deal?”

“Deal,” Brianna answered, quickly moving to wrap her arms around Jamie’s shoulders and kiss him on the cheek.

“Isn’t it a bit early to start supper?” Bree asked, still holding onto her father.

“Your Mam’s been hungry when she gets home, so I’ve been stepping up the start time.”

“We used to eat earlier in the winter – I think it’s because it’s dark so early, and the cold also makes you burn off more calories during the day, and, of course…”

Brianna trailed off.

“The baby,” Jamie said in her stead, “You still wouldn’t know to look at her, but it has affected her…appetites,” Jamie articulated, his choice of word carefully considered. “Help get this cooking, and we can go see our movie, unless you need to get your things settled.”

“I’m…settled…and…I’m glad I’m here.”

~~~~~
“Where is she?” Jamie said in a worried tone, after checking the supper. “Your Mam should have been home twenty minutes ago. She knew you were movin’ in today – she teased me about how excited I was.”

“I wouldn’t get worried yet - twenty minutes could just be the trains, or snowy sidewalks, or something kept her at the hospital a few extra minutes. She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Jamie nodded, but Brianna could tell he was keeping an ear attuned to the sound of the door. He let out a deep breath when Claire finally rattled the knob and walked through the door.

“Sorry I’m late,” she announced entering the kitchen, “I made one quick stop, and next thing I know, there’s a ten minute wait for the next train, and it’s packed, and I didn’t feel like riding home as a sardine, so I waited for the next one,” Claire explained as she put her bags on a chair and doffed her coat, hanging it over the back of the chair.

She made a bee line for Jamie and kissed him. He melted against her as his worry filtered out.

“God, you feel good,” Claire complimented, staying in his arms until he was ready to let go.

“And Bree,” she engaged with a smile, moving into her arms, “I’m so glad you’ve decided to be here with us.”

“Me too…should I carry your bags down so you can get changed before we eat?”

“That would be helpful…we’ll be right back.”

Claire gave Jamie a lingering look as she sauntered out of the room, Mona Lisa smile intriguing him.

~~~~~

Jamie said little during the meal, but he looked across the table at his two girls often, fighting the urge to cry. Claire saw the emotional struggle going on behind the mask he was trying to keep intact and reached out for his
hand. He let one tear go.

Brianna saw all of it, but tried to ignore it, not wanting to turn her moving in into a big thing, but Jamie’s gaze bored into her.

“Please don’t make a big deal – moving in here was the logical thing to do – it simplified things for all parties involved, and if you keep looking at me like that, I’m gonna start crying.”

Jamie and Claire smirked at each other.

“How about a toast, then?” Claire offered, raising her glass.

The three of them each held their glasses aloft, and without prior arrangement, all three said, “to family,” as if they were of a single mind.

Their mouths fell agape for a moment, and then they drank, celebrating that they were under one roof to stay for now.

Once they all put their glasses down to rest on the table, Jamie reached out one great paw to Brianna and the other to Claire.

They spoke no words while they remained touching, but none were needed.

~~~~~

When Jamie came into the Leoch room, Claire turned, revealing two items on the circular table.

“What are ye up to, Sassenach?”

“Presenting you with a choice,” she calmly stated.

Jamie ambled over, curious as to what she was on about. He stopped and kissed Claire, then put one hand on his hip.

“Now that Brianna will be living with us until she leaves for Scotland, I think it only prudent that we avoid…exposing her to…your complete person. There have been a few…near misses because of the bathroom situation, so you have your choice.
You can either wear the robe…or the bell.”

Claire was smiling sheepishly, and blushing for a rare occasion.

Jamie picked up the jingle bell by the red ribbon at its top and gave it a shake. He laughed.

“The ribbon’s a bit short if you wish me to wear it, is it not?”

“Not for where I plan to tie it,” she decreed.

“Oh?” Jamie inquired, one eyebrow raised.

“Don’t try to play innocent with me – I don’t mind if you’re naked all the time, but…Bree’s not ready to see something like that – nor do I think ever seeing her father naked is a good idea – she’s had enough shocks this year!”

“Aye,” he agreed with a nod, “I take your meaning. I’ll wear the robe – after all, the last time she almost saw me naked, the only thing I was wearing was you!”

He grabbed Claire about the waist and kissed her before she could retort.
Two months. That was basically the amount of time Jamie had to live in a nuclear family with Claire and Brianna. And he was going to make the most of it. He made sure Bree got up and had a breakfast waiting each morning, especially the days she had classes, since she was now much farther from campus and had to switch trains to make her way to class on time. Some mornings he was seeing Brianna and Claire off at the same time, to the same train until their transfers. For those hours each day, Jamie had a purpose, and a focus. He did his best to fill the hours when they weren’t home – a true house husband, he cleaned, cooked, did laundry. He went on grocery runs after scouring circulars for the local sales. It was as close to domestic bliss as Jamie could create.

But there were two countdown clocks imbedded in Jamie’s brain – one counting down to Brianna’s departure, another counting down to the end of Claire’s pregnancy.

~~~~~

I watch Jamie growing more emotionally dependent on Brianna with each passing day, and it worries me what he’s going to do after she leaves. I know it’s going to be difficult to let her leave, because I’m feeling it too. We haven’t been separated by more than a few miles for any length of time in her entire life, and I am dreading the initial period of only being able to communicate through technology – not being able to hug her. But at least we’ll have that line of communication, for I know what a true separation is like.

~~~~~

Bree arrived home and made a beeline for her drawing table, energized with an idea.

“I’m home,” she called out, knowing by now that Jamie’s keen hearing would not miss her announcement.

She laid a sheet of tracing paper over the plans for Lallybroch and began drawing her new idea in place, rough sketching on the semi-transparent paper, knowing she could discard this idea, too, without leaving a permanent mark. Brianna was intently focused. She knew she really needed to complete these plans soon, and she had made some final decisions in the last week. It was nit-picky details that were tripping her up, but if she was right, she’d finally come up with a working
solution. She was shaking as she put down her pencil.

“That’s it…I…I finished. That works…Oh my God.”

She sat stunned, taking deep breaths, almost hyperventilating. She’d done complete drawings for classes before, but this was different. This was really going to be built, it was going to exist, and she was responsible for it. It was exhilarating, but terrifying.

She stood and walked stiffly into the kitchen, getting herself a drink. She stood staring off, holding the glass in her hand.

“You look as if someone’s handed ye a cup o’ poison,” Jamie quipped.

“Huh?” Bree sounded, coming out of the depths of her mind.

Jamie pointed to her cup.

“Something wrong with it?” he asked.

“No…I…I figured out that last piece of the puzzle. I finished the plans – not the third floor, but everything else has fallen into place. I can send Wake the final design!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, lass,” Jamie whispered, taking her by the elbows, but stopping long enough to take the glass from her hand.

He pulled her in tight, both proud of her accomplishment, and scared that this took her one step closer to leaving.

~~~~~

With slight trepidation, Brianna sent the PDF of her completed blueprints for Lallybroch to Wake. She sat, her fists clenched, waiting to see if he sent a return message, or if a Skype call was incoming. Chills waltzed along her spine, and for a moment she thought she was going to throw up,
but the feeling passed after a few deep breaths, and after a few minutes passed without a reply. It was the middle of the night for Wake right now, after all. Bree had actually timed her email for when she hoped Wake was asleep. He’d been getting a bit impatient, frustrated that Brianna was having trouble finalizing the plans, but also understanding her fear to take that final step, to say she was finally done and that was it.

Bree often fretted about making a choice, but once she was sure, she was sure. She wasn’t ready to face him or talk to him just now. There was very little time until she would be back in Scotland, and each interaction with Wake left her in turmoil.

Later in the day, when she checked her messages, she was relieved to find a short reply from Wake.

“Thanks,” followed by a winking emoji was all it said.

~~~~~

Once the weather warmed a bit, Jamie and Brianna revisited the salvage store that had furnished most of the Leoch room. Each noted in their own minds how much more comfortable they were with each other this time, and Jamie even reached out at one point, taking Brianna’s hand and remarking, “a lot of water has gone under the bridge since we did this last.”

“I know…I was just thinking how much has changed, and how glad I am.”

“Aye,” he exhaled, glad to hear they were of similar minds, “I was a bundle of nerves that first time, going into ‘unfamiliar territory’,” he said, recalling Bree’s words, remembering how she’d thought he was armed.

Brianna looked over at her father with a growing smile.

“It feels like a lifetime ago now,” she offered.

Jamie smiled in return.
They both had ulterior motives in revisiting the salvage store. Bree wanted to find something special to give Jamie for his birthday since she’d be leaving so soon after, and Jamie was hoping to find a keepsake of some kind, something his daughter could treasure and remind her of home once she was on her own in Scotland. Jamie had spied a few interesting items on their first visit.

Once there, they each set off on their own journey.

“Meet you by the checkout in an hour?” Brianna asked as they were about to part.

“Aye,” Jamie said, and then winked playfully.

When their shopping time had elapsed, they each had a few items to show for it, and they each also had one item they were keeping secret from the other.

“You should bring Mom here sometime,” Bree commented.

Jamie laughed lightly, but was distracted by the new items being placed on display – a cradle and crib set. Jamie’s eyes lit up for a moment, dimming again, but not before Bree could notice.

“Do you think mom would like those for the baby?” she asked, placing her hand softly on top of Jamie’s.

“You could bring her…to look at it. She’d find all sorts of treasures here…I know it.”

Jamie smiled at her suggestion, sandwiching her hand between his and barely shaking his head.

“No need, lass.”

“Why not?” Brianna earnestly asked.

“You can’t tell me you didn’t get excited when you saw those,” she said, pointing at the baby furniture.
“Aye…aye I did…but…It’s not ye’re mam’s taste – besides, the need for that is months away…And a bairn should be…inseparable…I canna imagine…letting go…”

He was holding her hand so tightly it almost hurt. They locked eyes for a moment while Jamie sorted out his words. Brianna was afraid she’d put the pain in Jamie’s eyes because she’d be leaving soon, but it seemed somehow deeper than that. Bree remembered her mother’s words when she’d told Claire about Jamie’s worried inclinations. Jamie was haunted by his past, and Bree could see the ghosts in his eyes.

“All in good time, lass. Bairns don’t need material things as much as they need love.”

His grip eased and the smile returned to his lips, even if it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Everything will be alright,” Bree promised her father once more.

He nodded, and was finally able to release a deep breath. Jamie squeezed his eyes closed.

~~~~~

The days were flying by, and Jamie was feeling it intensely. How long did this family have until it was once again splintered? There was a growing hollowness in Jamie even while he tried to imprint these few months forever in his mind.

Bree had pared her wardrobe down to just the bare essentials, having begun packing for Scotland already. She wanted to ship most of her ‘household’ so it could be there when she reached Scotland, and save some of the baggage fees. Two thick blankets surrounded anything breakable in her first crate to be shipped out. Brianna knew Fiona would supply her, at least temporarily, with sheets and towels, and probably enough leftovers to keep her from needing to cook at all, but she wanted some familiar surroundings to put her stamp instantly on Lallybroch. Wake had made it sound like she’d be roughing it at first, and she wanted to be prepared in case it was closer to camping out than living in a house.

She was doing the final inventory when Jamie came across her.
“What’s this, lass?” he asked, brows furrowing.

“My first shipment to Lallybroch – I won’t need these things again while I’m still here.”

Jamie took in a deep breath and nodded.

“It’s a lot closer than I’d like to think -you leavin’. But I am…so proud. You made this a home just by being here, I have no doubt you can do the same at Lallybroch.”

“You really are determined to make me cry,” Bree said, blinking frequently, trying to keep her tears at bay.

Brianna melted into him, nestling against his chest.

“I would never try to make you cry,” he whispered, “I hope you know that. I want nothing but happiness for you – you deserve the best life has to offer.”

“I do?” she snuffed in return.

“Sure…” Jamie exhaled the word. “You are my bairn; I want the best for you…I just thought…I might…have more time – If I’d found you sooner, you and your mam. You are grown, ready to go out there on your own, but you will always be my bairn, my heart, mo chridhe.”

Jamie kissed Bree’s forehead.

“Always.”

~~~~~

“Did I sleep for a week, Mom? What happened?” Brianna asked, perplexed as how her mother could look so much more pregnant in such a short span.
“I’ve ‘popped’ as they call it – I knew it was coming. It happened just about this far in with you, too. One day you’re a little bit pregnant, next thing you know, you couldn’t hide it if you tried.”

“Scary,” Brianna commented, “How did Jamie handle the sudden change?”

“Angst, fear – irrefutable physical proof of my pregnancy is now staring him in the face. It only lasted a moment, but… I know this is stirring up memories for him – to be honest, it’s stirring up quite a few for me, as well.”

There was a pregnant pause as both women thought about Jamie.

“I shouldn’t go, not now,” Brianna fretted.

“You must – you’ve put in so much work. Jamie told me how… stunned you looked when you finished the plans. The more real this becomes, the more scared you get, just like Jamie and this baby. You are so like him in many ways. You feel and fear more deeply for those you love than for yourself. It makes you a wonderfully caring person, but one who worries so much it can paralyze you. You must keep moving forward, just like Jamie.”

Bree nodded, knowing her mother was right.

Claire and Brianna continued talking until Jamie came down to tell them supper was on the table. Bree had now had a heart to heart talk with each of her parents, and while leaving still loomed large, she was trying to steel herself for the inevitability. Bree had stood on her own two feet through most of her college years, and after this span of being strengthened and tempered in a two-parent home, she’d be able to withstand the storm, and take root at Lallybroch.

~~~~~

Bree stood over the last crate of items she was going to have shipped to Scotland. She looked from the shipping crate to the several boxes of items around the floor, trying to decide what went and what stayed in Jamie’s treasure room.

“It’s hard to decide, is it not?” Jamie asked, seeing Brianna pensively making her assessments.
“Will something be of use, or merely a hindrance,” Jamie mused. “If something gets left behind, lass, we can send it along,” Jamie assured her, clamping his hand on her shoulder.

Bree put her hand on his on her shoulder.

“I know, it’s just… I find myself thinking about what it would be like to leave everything behind – to have to just shed my entire former life. You and Mom have both done that…”

“Aye, but you don’t have to,” he smiled warmly, “In fact, do you think ye have room for one more thing?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I got ye a little…token…”

He took a long, narrow box from his pocket.

“It’s just a little something to keep you safe as you venture into… unfamiliar territory.”

Brianna opened the box and smiled as she saw the small folding knife. The pearl handle shimmered in the light.

“I’ll keep it handy… Thank-you.”

The tears were welling up.

“I wish I could go and stay at the same time. I’m gonna miss you so much, you and Mom.”

~~~~~

All the movies, save one, had been watched. All that could be shipped in advance was in transit, if
not already waiting for Brianna in Scotland. Tears had been shed, in private and together, fears had been shared as much as anyone dared. But before this family of three left the comfort of each other’s company, there was one more truly joyous occasion to celebrate – Jamie’s two hundred and ninety fifth birthday, this first day of May, 2016.

Brianna made cupcakes – chocolate of course, and had everything set up in the kitchen for when Jamie and Claire came back from Claire’s doctor’s appointment. Bree had wrapped the treasure she found in the salvage store, hoping it would be something that could bring a smile to her father’s face while she was not there. As long as she kept busy, she could think about the party without thinking about leaving the next day. Her classes had been over, and she was technically graduated from college for two weeks now, but she couldn’t imagine leaving that close to Jamie’s birthday, so she’d decided to stay until they could celebrate the milestone.

~~~

“You doing OK?” Claire asked as she and Jamie waited for Dr.MacInnes.

“I’ll do,” Jamie said with a pained smile.

Claire reached out her hand and left it hanging in the air until Jamie took it in his own hand and came to her side.

“Claire, sorry to keep you waiting this afternoon,” the doctor spoke as she entered the room, “but you did keep me waiting for this appointment – you’ve rescheduled this ultrasound twice.”

Jamie looked wide-eyed at Claire, unaware of these scheduling changes.

“Not that it affects the health of the baby,” Janet said in soothing tones, seeing Jamie’s expression.

Janet put a hand on Jamie’s upper arm.

“Claire has done everything possible, taken all the tests, taken most of my advice. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Jamie nodded.
Dr. MacInnes began setting up the monitor and took a tube of gel that had been warming.

“Why don’t you get on the other side?” she suggested to Jamie, having him move to the other side of the bed so she could get close enough to Claire to do the scan.

The gel made a flatulent sound as it splatted on Claire’s belly, and the doctor proceeded to slide the head of the ultrasound around until she found her first target – the heartbeat.

“The heart sounds good and strong.”

Claire smiled at Jamie, hoping to make him smile back at her, but he was concentrating on what the doctor was doing, and what she might say next.

“We’ve got a complete compliment of fingers and toes – those are some feet, now, the big question – do you want to know the sex of the baby?”

Jamie very quickly said, “No.”

“No, I’d like to be surprised, too,” Claire concurred.

“OK, then. Let me take a few measurements, do some calculating…looks like I was right on the money with the conception date – Samhain – so you should be greeting this baby late July. Everything is right on track. I see no problems. This is one of the least complicated geriatric pregnancies I’ve ever encountered.”

With that, and the snap of a pair of rubber gloves, Dr. Janet MacInnes exited the room.

“What does she mean… ‘geriatric pregnancy’?”

“It’s just the term they use for mothers over a certain age – I think the cutoff is 35. Sometimes older women have problems that younger ones do not – certain genetic errors become prevalent – but I’ve had testing done, and there’s no sign.”
Claire used the sheet on the bed to wipe the gel off her belly and pulled her shirt back in place.

“I would say this was a pretty good birthday present for you, but you don’t seem convinced,” Claire lamented.

“Aye, it’s good news, but…”

“But Bree leaves tomorrow.”

“Aye,” he said with a sad nod of his head, keeping it bowed for a beat.

“Let’s get home to her,” Claire suggested.

~~~~~

Brianna was nervous as she waited for her parents to arrive home. Her mother had assured her there would be no surprises at this appointment, so she needn’t worry that Jamie would be unwilling to celebrate his birthday. She released a relieved breath as she heard them enter the foyer, and she lit the candle on the cupcake she’d placed on Jamie’s plate. He saw the little licking flame hovering above the swirl of frosting, and looked up, looking for Brianna.

“Happy Birthday,” she greeted him.

She relaxed as she watched the one sided smile creep up Jamie’s face.

“Och, ye did all this for me?” he questioned.

Bree nodded vehemently as he pulled her into his arms. She felt Jamie sigh and kissed him on the cheek.

“I’m gonna miss this,” Jamie proclaimed.
He felt her nod, slowly this time.

“The candle is about to become a puddle on your frosting,” Claire warned, interceding to blow it out herself.

Jamie and Brianna moved back to arm’s length, Jamie looking adoringly at his daughter. He opened his mouth to speak several times, but no words came out, and he just shook his head, obviously filled with pride.

~~~~~

I spent most of Jamie’s birthday party fighting tears, but they were mostly tears of happiness. Watching Brianna interact with Jamie was at once heartwarming and heart breaking. They were just finding each other on the eve of a prolonged separation, but the joy the pair was expressing left me almost euphoric. Considering the fare, it could have just been a sugar high, or a hormone surge on my part.

And then came a moment that is now imprinted in my heart for all time. The box was so small that it hid under the edge of the plates on the table. It could have easily gone unnoticed, and I could tell by the sudden look of dawning on her face that she had nearly forgotten.

“Here,” she offered nervously.

Jamie took the box from Brianna’s hand and slowly opened the lid. A sphere the size of a half dollar slipped into his palm. He turned it over a couple of times. The outside did, indeed, look like the two faces of a walking liberty half dollar, but more curved, like it had been split in two and a puff of air blown in between the two halves.

“It opens,” Brianna told him, offering to help with the extension of her palm. Jamie poured the little round into her hand and watched as she found the latch, revealing the secret opening, and the added gift within it. She handed it back to him, and the most delighted smile lit Jamie’s face.

“Och,” was all he managed vocalize.

“What is it?” I asked.
Visibly overcome, Jamie handed it to me, and I saw the tiny picture of Brianna that was inside.

“Oh, my, Bree.”

“I have other pictures if you don’t like that one – actually I’ve got several dozen other shots – it was so hard to decide.”

“Tis a perfect choice,” Jamie choked out, his voice still failing him.

~~~~~

After the cake course, Jamie and Brianna cobbled together a decent supper, and we sat around for a bit, basking in each other’s company. It was bittersweet when Brianna made the move to clear the table, but she was smiling as she announced, “Movie time.”

“Mom, will you join us tonight?” Brianna queried, looking at me with hopeful eyes.

“Of course,” I replied, honored to be part of Bree and Jamie’s private ritual.

We made our way down to the media room, Jamie getting me all nestled by his side.

“I know I promised, so tonight…would you both watch The Princess Bride with me?”

Jamie looked at me and then turned his smile toward Brianna.

“As you wish,” Jamie said in a soft voice.

~~~~~
Bree was feeling a bit apprehensive as she waited for the plane to take off. Part of her wanted to make a break for it, run home, and hide with the blankets over her head. She was leaving home – the only city she knew by heart, and her mom, and a dad she was still getting to know. But it was an amazing opportunity. She was going to be able to put her new college degree to work, and restore her ancestral home. Jamie trusted her to make Lallybroch a home again. Bree just wished it didn’t mean being away from her soon to be growing family.

Brianna was worried, but less for herself than for her parents. Her mom was six months pregnant, after all, and had confided in her that sometimes Jamie would look at her like a fading memory. Knowing what she did now about Jamie’s life, and about the baby they lost, and how even her own existence had been in question, Brianna didn’t want to be leaving just now, but the ball was already rolling. Bree had been working on plans for the house and other buildings at Lallybroch since before she returned home from the wedding. And she knew Wake had already put a lot of work in on her behalf.

The plane started to move, and Bree knew it was too late to change her mind. She white-knuckle grabbed both arm rests, and steeled herself for take-off. She closed her eyes and imagined herself locked in the tight hug Jamie had given her.

“You’ll do, lass,” a warm burr sounded next to her. “They’ll get us home.”

Brianna opened her eyes and flashed a glance over. A wave of warmth went over her. Home. She hadn’t thought of Lallybroch or Scotland that way until now. She smiled at the older gentleman seated next to her, and he patted her hand.

~~~~~
Brianna had just retrieved her second large suitcase from the carousel. She exhaled in relief – she, and her luggage, had both safely traversed from Boston to Scotland. Solid ground had never felt so good. She hoisted one handle in each hand and lurched along with a heavy weight on either side, headed for the place she and Roger had agreed to meet.

She passed by a bank of windows and noticed it was raining.

“It’s Scotland,” she muttered, “I’m sure they have thirty-five words for rain like the Eskimos do for snow.”

Bree turned around, craning her neck to try to sight Roger somewhere in the crowd.

“Looking for someone?” A somewhat familiar sounding voice asked from behind her. She turned quickly, both suitcases swinging at arm’s length. She had her smile set to greet Roger, but her jaw dropped some as the face she saw was the one she’d been unconsciously flirting with over Skype the last few months. One suitcase was venturing very close to his nether regions, so his hands went into protection mode while he prepared for impact.

His entire face was anticipating a hit, but Bree altered the trajectory of the bag and only skimmed his knuckles.

“Sorry,” she said with a smirk. “Hospitalization averted,” he joked, but put a hand over hers, and pushed down until the bag settled on the floor and he felt her hand release the handle.

“What are you doing here? Roger – “

“I…I thought we might need my truck – and it looks like I was right,” he said, tilting his head toward the two knee-high, couch-cushion sized suitcases.

“I am moving here, not just here for a two week vacation this time. I need…my stuff.”
“After all ye shipped, I woulda thought there’d be nary a thing left!”

Bree’s face turned sullen and she shot a dirty look at Wake. He immediately felt he’d stepped in it and began back-peddling.

“I’m…I’m trying to joke with you, and doing a crap job of it,” he confessed, hoping honesty would work where humor was dying a slow death.

Bree’s smirk slowly returned, up one side of her face, but she also felt her cheeks burning and a warm fuzzy feeling in the pit of her stomach. And this time, she didn’t have the safety-net of thousands of miles or closing the computer.

Her nod let him off the hook.

~~~~~

It was down to a light mizzle as they headed outside.

“If you wait here, I’ll bring my truck around. I’m no planning to rupture myself to get your luggage to its new home.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it,” Brianna commented, taking the mince-y steps that were all she could muster with such weight in her hands.

Wake looked mournfully in her direction.

“Doona be like that,” he requested, “You have nothing to prove.” Wake put one hand on each of Brianna’s shoulders. “To me or anyone else here.”

“I wasn’t…I just…I don’t want anyone to think…that I can’t handle what I’ve gotten myself into…even if it is true.”

Bree looked down, feeling completely exposed.
“Why would you think that? Even for a minute?...Not once, in all the times we talked, did I feel that you were not one hundred percent on top...I mean...in total control of this project.”

Bree looked back up into his eyes. He looked so reassuring. Brianna bit her lower lip with her upper teeth.

“I’ll be right back with the truck.”

~~~~~

“So...to Lallybroch, or to the manse?” Wake asked as he navigated his way out of the airport parking lot.

“You know they’ve got a feast in the works,” Wake continued.

“I was afraid of that,” Brianna piped. “I’d really like to see where things have gotten at Lallybroch.”

“Then Lallybroch it is – you can see if things are up to snuff in terms of staying there – if not, Mam’s set up a room for you.”

~~~~~

Bree was caught off guard as Wake took a turn to the right as they approached the house.

“Um, ah...um,” she vocalized as she pointed back to the left.

“We put in a new access road, had to, there was no way some of the trucks would make it otherwise – it can be changed...removed completely if ye like, once the trucks no longer need it.”

“O...K,” she hesitated, “I have only been here in person once – well, twice, technically, so my
mind was kinda set on how it looks in the drawings. Coming at it from a new place – it just…
looks so different.”

“Aye,” Wake replied with a nod, “Perspective.”

Brianna nodded.

“I just wonder if I need to reconsider what I designed.”

“Nothing’s set in stone, yet,” Wake offered, “But…I like what you had in mind – it works within
the traditional outline, but it feels very modern inside – perhaps just some tweaking is needed.”

The warm and fuzzy feeling was creeping up from Brianna’s toes. It was an effect Wake had on her
that she liked, most of the time. But right now, being alone with Wake, on a property that was
miles from anyone, with no one likely to be anywhere nearby, and the memory of him finding and
seeing her naked, it was the last thing she wanted to be feeling. Alert sirens started going off in her
head.

~~~~~

“Here we are,” Wake said encouragingly as he pulled up to the new front door of Lallybroch.

Brianna slid from Wake’s truck and walked up to the door, open-mouthed as she took in the vista.
The double doors welcomed her into the structure that was still mostly bare bones on the ground
floor, but Bree could see the beginnings of the new kitchen, and the potential for the old kitchen to
become an inviting living-room space. The new platform for the stairs wrapped around, and the
steps dropped into the new kitchen. Wake followed Brianna around as she took it all in. She was
taking in deep breaths, trying to burn off her nerves.

“I know it still looks quite rough – we had to tear out to the framing, even to the stones in several
cases. All the electric had to be replaced, and piping fitted throughout the house, so there’s not a
wall we havna put at least a hole into.”

Bree let out a breath and a sigh, a pathetic smiled adorning her face.
“It’s not all bad,” Wake consoled. “I…I took the liberty of setting up some of your stuff in a third floor bedroom – Da had a couple of bedframes in storage, so we set one up for you, and another in the next best third floor room in case you had a guest. Ma insisted on two new mattresses if you insisted on staying here while the work continued. Shall we…head up?”

Bree nodded and began the climb. Wake came up behind her, gently placing his hand on her back to stop her from going by the room he meant to be hers. She took in a quick breath and tensed up.

“This one,” he informed her, pulling his hand back and pushing the door open.

She gave the room a quick scan then looked over her shoulder with an amazed smile for Wake.

“You set this up?”

“Aye,” he replied with a subtle nod.

Brianna was at a loss for words as she gave it a more careful look-see.

“It’s…it’s really nice.” Bree bit her bottom lip.

“Well, you did say ye wanted to live here, so I tried to make it livable, if a bit rustic. So you’ve got this, the second floor bathroom, and I cobbled a bit of a kitchen in the utility room until the full thing gets installed.”

“Show me?” she asked, unable to hide the excitement in her eyes.

Wake nodded and led Brianna back to the first floor and into the utility room.

“Coffee pot, hot plate, toaster oven, microwave, and micro-fridge,” he said as he pointed out each item.

Bree turned and put her arms around Wake’s shoulders.
“Thank-you,” she simply said, pulling back before Wake could circle her with his arms.

For a second, their eyes locked. The pull between them was magnetic. Wake began leaning in. Bree could feel the heat coming off his face. He closed his eyes as he whispered, “Bree.”

“No,” Bree softly gulped out, turning her head quickly, afraid that if she let this kiss take place, she’d find herself unable to stop.

As she fought not to tremble, Bree realized how strong her attraction to Wake had grown. She felt vulnerable and alone, but there was too much at stake. Their business relationship had to take precedence over any budding romance. Restoring Lallybroch – that was why Brianna was here. She steeled herself, fists clenched at her sides.

After a few awkward moments of keeping her back to Wake while she calmed herself, Bree turned back to face him, took a deep breath and asked, “So…Fiona has plans…for dinner I mean?”

“Aye, she does,” he answered, apologizing with his eyes.

“Perhaps we should go,” Bree suggested, afraid of being alone with him much longer.

“After you. I’ll lock up so it’ll be safe ‘til morning.”

“I am coming back here tonight, if it’s not too much trouble?” Bree inflected.

“No trouble,” he said with a relieved breath, realizing there would be some differences between long-distance and face to face, and he had to tread more lightly, even if the only thing he could think about right now was kissing Bree until she melted into him.

“I’ll get your bags,” Wake volunteered, hoping that moving away from Brianna would clear his head.

He took his time, breathed in the fresh air. He sat on the opened tailgate of his truck and tried to
purge the feelings of desire that had bedeviled him since he had found Brianna below the mill, but that only brought forth the image of her body as she rose from the waterside.

“Och, Brianna Fraser, you’ll be the end of me,” he whispered.

He took the handle of each bag and drew them up beside him. He stood and hoisted the heavy collection of belongings and headed into the house. Bree held the door open for him and watched him head up the stairs, unable to keep her eyes from appreciating his rear end. She blushed, glad he wasn’t about to turn around and see her cheeks and ears glowing like beacons.

~~~~

“Wren,” Roger greeted with a broad smile. He was unsure how much contact would be acceptable to Brianna, and it warmed his heart as she hugged him tight and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“How was the flight?” he asked.

Bree just sighed and nodded.

“Well, I hope it hasna rattled you so much as you canna eat.”

“No…I’m starving. I couldn’t eat before I left.”

“Fee will be glad. She’s been cooking all day.”

“I didn’t want any fuss,” Bree notified.

“You know it’s just her way of showing her love.”

“I’m just…trying to avoid any big emotional scenes. Leaving my parents in Boston, coming here right now with all that’s going on…I’m trying not to fall apart before…” she gulped.
“It’s alright, now, lass. I know we’re no yer parents, but perhaps in loco parentis? Fee and I are here for ye, but would calling them help?”

Bree nodded, snuffing back her running nose.

“I think it might, but I don’t want to call them crying.”

“Of course…wouldn’t do to get the lot of you cryin’. Would you like to wash your face, freshen up a bit?”

Bree nodded.

“You know the way.”

Wake had been surreptitiously taking in the conversation between Brianna and Roger while still sitting in the kitchen with his mother. It made Wake come to think Bree was in a more fragile state than it seemed, and he felt doubly guilty about making a move on her so quickly.

“Are ye even listenin’ to me?” Fiona asked her son.

“Sorry, my mind drifted.”

“Well, you better just un-drift it where Brianna Fraser is concerned for the time being.”

Wake flashed a sheepish grin, but tried to keep it to himself.

“I wilna do a thing she doesna want me to,” he burred with an exaggerated accent.

Fiona snapped at Wake with her kitchen towel.

“Out, out now. This kitchen is feeling crowded, and I need my space to work.”
Wake laughed his way into the study.

“Have ye annoyed your mam again?”

“Always,” he replied with a smirk, throwing himself at the mercy of the couch and putting his feet up on the coffee table.

“How’d it go…pickin’ the lass up? Ye took your time.”

“She wanted to see Lallybroch right off, and I’ll be takin’ her back out there tonight.”

Roger nodded slowly.

“You won’t be stayin’…”

It was more a warning than a question.

“Not unless she begs,” he joked. “No, Da, I’ll be sleeping in my own bed.”

They both fell silent as Bree came back downstairs.

“Would it be alright if I use your den to make my call?” Brianna asked as she entered the study.

“Of course, Wren.”

~~~~~

Brianna returned from the den about twenty minutes later, obviously having been crying again.
“Nothin’s wrong is it, Wren?” Roger asked.

“Mom’s feeling emotional,” Brianna revealed, trying to smile.

“Understandable, lass,” Roger replied, knowing Bree was just as likely as emotional as her mother. He knew they’d never been separated for long or such a great distance, and could understand if Brianna was feeling a level of angst over the separation herself.

Roger opened his arms, inviting Bree into a comforting hug. She gladly accepted the silent invitation and briefly nestled her head into his shoulder. It felt nice. It felt familiar. It felt like Wake. Bree’s head snapped up as Roger felt the jolt run through Brianna’s body. He gave her a look of concern as they parted, which she shook off subtly.

Wake nodded at Bree as she sat at the opposite end of the couch. Her apprehension permeated the room. She tucked her hands under her thighs, palms down to the cushions below. She didn’t want to fall apart in front of Wake, but she was barely holding it together. She was two ragged breaths away from breaking down into a sob when Fiona called them to the table.

She seated Bree and Wake across the table from one another. It was a quiet table for the first part of the meal. Lots of glances passed between the MacKenzies, their non-verbal shorthand providing them with communication without words while Brianna concentrated on her plate. Her main course ingested, Brianna released a sigh and looked up.

“Feeling better, dear?” Fiona asked.

She nodded, her cheeks pinking up.

“I didn’t dare eat anything before getting on the plane. Jamie said it was like him when he was about to go into battle – he could never stomach food. It’s just one more way I take after him…I guess.”

“Your Da was a soldier, then?” Wake asked.

“A couple of times,” she said with an impish grin taking over her face.
Roger and Fiona both laughed at that, Wake knowing there was something he didn’t know.

“Could I entice you with a piece of chocolate cake?” Fiona inflected, leaning in close to Brianna’s ear.

“Did you make a cake for each of us?” she eagerly replied.

“Oh, good – your appetite is back on track I see,” Fiona commented.

“Can I have milk with it?” Bree shyly asked in a child-like voice.

“And you asked why I got in an extra milk,” Fiona directed at Roger with a finger pointed right at him. “Get her the metal measuring cup.”

“It makes the milk taste better - ice cold,” Brianna interjected before anyone asked.

Wake found this dinner theater amusing, but it had told him several useful things about Brianna that he could put in the back of his mind for future reference. Bree all but licked her plate clean, and the four of them made their way into the study to relax after her welcome dinner. Bree was much more relaxed, and sat back as she settled into the corner of the couch, extending her legs and crossing her ankles.

“Feeling a bit more settled now, lass?” Roger inquired, seeing the mellow expression on her face.

Bree nodded lazily.

“I know I shouldn’t be tired – it’s barely noon in Boston, but…” Brianna yawned.

“Should I take ye back to the house?” Wake asked.

“If I sleep now, I’ll be up way too early tomorrow – no – talk to me – tell me how the work at
Lallybroch has been going. I’d like to be up to speed on the project.”

It was the first time Brianna had looked animated since her excitement about the make-shift kitchen in the utility room had led her to hug Wake leading to his attempt to kiss her.

“Well…when we first got in there, we knew there was some kind of leak. Wallpaper was peeling off the walls on either side of the bathroom, and I was afraid it was the plumbing – turns out, it was the flashing where the exhaust pipe went through the roof, but the moisture had wicked into a lot of the roofing, and was beginning to seep into the walls as well. That’s when we decided to strip back to the timbers in any room the leak had reached. I think we were lucky – the leak wasn’t all that old – if it had gone on, you would have had a real mess on your hands.”

“Timing is everything, lass,” Roger interjected. “Had you not taken on this project when you did…” He shook his head.

Bree suddenly had a practical concern. “Is there hot water…at Lallybroch?” Bree asked Wake.

“Aye, most of the utility work is completed, roughed in at least, but the original plumbing stack was solid – cast iron solid, so no need to replace it. It was a retrofit, as ye know, but done right, so the original indoor bathroom is all good.”

“In other words,” Roger translated, “Ye can take a hot shower.”

“I said that,” Wake complained.

“Don’t worry, I speak contractor,” Brianna offered with a sly smile.

Wake nodded his head in appreciation, very much liking her reply, knowing his blush must have been visible.

“Quick question,” Wake blurted, “Do ye wanna meet everybody all at once, like reviewing the troops, or would you rather I introduce them when the need arises, one by one?”
Bree glared at Wake.

“I uh…I guess one at a time.”

“You should know, up ‘til now, once I’ve opened the house for the day, the men are in and out – but I told them that would change once you were here because you’d be livin’ in the house.”

“Oh.” Brianna responded, “Well, I’ll try to set a schedule that doesn’t interrupt the status quo – the first few days, though…”

Wake nodded. The harder he tried to think about the restoration of Lallybroch, the more images of Brianna crowded out all other thoughts. Just being in the same room was stirring him – Bree was enchanting whether it was intentional or not.

“So,” Roger ventured, standing from his chair and placing his whisky glass back on the tray on the table behind the couch, “You’ll be joining us for meals each night...for a while anyway?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

Bree glanced at Wake.

“Wake will be glad to bring ye, when he comes,” Roger promised Bree as he came up behind his youngest and placed his hands on Wake’s shoulders and pressed him into the couch.

“Aye,” Wake concurred with a quick nod of agreement.

“You come here for dinner every night?” Bree asked. “I thought you had a place of your own.”

“Aye, I do, but it doesn’t have much of a kitchen, any more,” he added subliminally, “Or home cooked food,” Wake admitted, sheepish grin painting his features.
“Now, you’re sure you doona want to stay here until the house is a bit closer to done?” Fiona asked Bree.

“No, it would take too long each day coming and going. Besides, Wake has set things up really nice for me at Lallybroch, and I’d like to give it go out there. I might just see something living there that makes my plans feel impractical. I’d rather see it now than when more is in place.”

“Well, the room will stay available should the rustic charm wear off.”

Bree nodded and smiled, but noticed the glances passing between Wake and Fiona, and felt something was amiss, but didn’t feel on solid enough footing to point it out.

~~~~~

Fiona took Wake aside just before he and Brianna headed out.

“You’ve gone and given the lass your kitchen, haven’t ye? Not that that collection of toys constituted much of a kitchen to begin with.”

Wake bowed his head.

“It’s a lovely gesture,” Fee complimented, “But ye didna tell her – I didna know you had such a selfless side,” she teased.

~~~~~

“Hey,” Wake said, reaching for Bree’s hand before she could get out of the truck.

“I’m…really glad you’re here now.”

He shifted his eyes up to gauge her expression.
“Anything you need…ask me.”

Her hand relaxed allowing Wake to interlock his fingers with hers as he slid his hand along hers. She clamped her fingers over his, her head beginning to nod.

“I’m here for you.”

“Thank-you,” Brianna softly spoke, “I think I’m gonna need the help.”

Bree cracked a shy smile.

“Och,” Wake breathed out, smiling himself, “You’ve got this.”

“I hope so.”

“I know you’re scairt. I heard you talkin’ wi’ Da, but there’s no need. Ye can trust me.”

“I…I do…It’s just going to take some time for me to get my feet under me,” Bree admitted.

Wake hoped she meant it that she trusted him, and he hoped this approach would put their relationship on the right track.

“I can tell you, everybody here wants you to succeed.”

“That’s good to know…Well…I should…go get some sleep. I wouldn’t want to make a bad impression on my first day!”

“Aye.”
They both looked at their joined hands as they slid them apart.

“Goodnight,” Bree barely forced from her throat.

“Sleep well,” Wake warmly toned.

Brianna nodded, slipped from the truck, and closed the door with enough force for it to catch.

“Take an extra blanket for tonight,” Wake called out the window behind her, “It’s meant to be cold.”

Bree turned back, smiled and waved.

~~~~~

There was barely enough room in the second floor bathroom to get off the toilet without banging headfirst into the door, and there would be no lounging in hot water in the tub for Brianna, as the tub was little more than four feet long, in fact, she’d not even be able to stand fully upright in the shower, either, as the shower head was only inches higher than she was tall. Brianna needed a shower, though, and she didn’t want to leave it for the morning in case she couldn’t get going. She held her breath until the water became tinged with warmth, and it came up to temperature rather quickly.

The bed felt good. It had been perfectly made, corners folded and tucked, and sliding into fresh sheets always brought a calming effect as Bree slid her feet down into the darkness. It was crisply cool against her skin, but thankfully warmed quickly. She pulled the hood of her sweatshirt up and brought the blankets up over her shoulders, including the extra blanket she spread over the bed. As soon as she felt warm, Brianna fell asleep.

~~~~~

The beeping was incessant. Bree swatted wildly, hoping to get the alarm to stop before she realized she hadn’t set an alarm. As her consciousness deepened, she knew where she was.
“Scotland…Lallybroch…morning.”

She groggily got to her feet and headed to the nearest window. A large truck was backing and beeping, doing it’s best alarm clock impression.

Bree swung one of her suitcases onto the bed and unlatched it, throwing back the cover. She gathered a pair of dark blue carpenter jeans, black tee shirt and a faded dark green pull-over sweatshirt, and all required under-garments into a bundle and made her way down to the bathroom. She emerged from the cubicle dressed and refreshed, but still in need of shoes. She’d have to think about stationing footwear on the first floor, she thought to herself, as she headed back up to her bedroom to find appropriate shoes.

She sat on the bed to lace up her work boots and almost succumbed to the siren call of her still warm bed, shaking off the thought of crawling back in when the load on the previously beeping, backing truck dropped with a thud, and at least two voices yelled, “stadaibh a-nis!”

“I’m up, I’m up,” she told herself. “Was that in English?” she asked the air, “No, I don’t think it was.”

Bree had just landed on the ground floor and was about to amble into her make-shift kitchen when she heard three taps on the door.

“Bree, ye decent?” curled out of Wake’s mouth.

“I’m coming in.”

She heard the key turn in the lock and watched as Wake slowly pushed the door in and peered around it. He smiled broadly as he spotted Bree standing there.

“Och, good, you’re up. I brought coffee - thought you might not be up to speed this morning enough to make it yourself.”

He worked the cup loose from the holder and then took a drink from his own cup that was still wedged in the multi-cup holder. He held Bree’s cup out to her.
“Here.”

Bree took the cup with a smirk.

“What were you going to do if I wasn’t up yet?” Brianna asked.

“I’d have left a note on the cup…stomped around until I woke you, and then asked, ‘sorry, did I wake ye?’.”

“Not the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ treatment?” Bree innocently quipped, and then bit her lip thinking about Wake waking her with a kiss.

“Not on the first day,” he threw back, seeing that she had caught herself off guard with the hidden innuendo of her words.

“So, drink up, I’ve got a couple of people you should meet,” Wake advised.

“I’m good,” Brianna said with a smile and a nod.

Wake gave his head a healthy point toward the door, and Bree followed him outside.

~~~~~

For most of her first day at Lallybroch, Bree met the people who had been working for her. Wake escorted her and introduced her to each department head, for lack of a better title. They were mostly men, and mostly twenty or more years older. They were polite, but Bree sensed she saw doubt in their eyes.

“So, we now report to you?” one man questioned.

Bree stood up tall, his tone making her indignant; she flashed anger in her eyes that Wake saw.
“You have been reportin’ to her from day one – through me, but with Ms. Fraser’s full knowledge and approval. She is your boss – she’s my boss. Ye had no problem with that before she got here, before ye saw her face, so I’d think you might want to watch yourself if you want to stay employed.”

Wake stood, staring defiantly at the man in front of him, like a rooster pondering whether or not to strike when Brianna intervened.

“Stop it,” Bree roared, stepping between the men, staring at Wake.

“You don’t have to defend me,” she barked, and then turned to face the other man. “And if you have a problem working for me…get over it or get out,” she pointed emphatically over her shoulder.

“No problems,” he mumbled.

Bree waited for several beats so as not to look like she was making a hasty retreat, and then shot a glance over her shoulder at Wake, and began walking away. Wake was on her heels. Her anger fueled her straight to the tower. She stopped as she placed both hands on the side of the tower. Wake was almost afraid to interrupt her thoughts.

“Um…”

“Thank-you,” Bree exhaled, trying to flush her anger out with a deep breath.

“Thank me? For what?”

“For giving me enough time to form the words I needed. I expected to find that reaction, but I wasn’t prepared,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m also sorry – that I jumped at you that way.”

“No harm done,” Wake warmly burred.

“You haven’t done any work on the tower yet?”
“Afraid bein’ in charge doesn’t leave much time for my own craft – and you needed the house first.”

Bree nodded and slowly turned.

“Right…so…is there anyone else you think I should meet today?” Brianna queried humorously.

“I think that’ll do, don’t you?” he chortled back.

“Yeah, probably.”

“Look,” Wake launched into, “the day is nearly done, and I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. We usually take a lunch break, but I worked you straight through today – not that I meant to, but, Mam’s got a good supper in the works – always does, and I think we could both use a good meal and a good cool down after that confrontation.”

Bree nodded in agreement.

“One day at a time, lass,” he counseled.
Learning Curves

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took so long to post this chapter. I don't know who saw the message I posted a couple of weeks ago, but March was hellish - snow every time I turned around, one storm leaving us in the dark for 6 days with no power or heat, getting below 40 degrees in the house the last 3 nights before we FINALLY got power back (that was after an accusation from the power company that we stole components of the transformer off the closest pole!) That storm also collapsed our chicken yard, so it's been 24/7 close quarters with our birds. I did get some writing done by flashlight until my fingers went numb and I had to dive back under the multiple covers, but once power was back, it took a long time to feel human again, and it effected my writing. Sometimes real life gets in the way...and then the Outlander season 3 DVD got released...Binged over the last two days, but got the chapter done. Again, sorry for the delay.

Learning Curves

It was suspiciously quiet this morning. Bree sat up in the middle of her bed to the sounds of silence. She brushed her long tresses out of her face and listened for the rhythms of construction. All she heard was birds calling, and other tell-tale sounds of nature. She gave a sigh of relief. She’d hit the ground running, as far as getting her feet wet in her first construction project was concerned, and this first weekend was welcome. Bree hoped she could take a few breaths, and let it all sink in. She was in a whole new world, and a whole new part of her life.

“Time to be an adult,” she mumbled to herself.

Fiona had given her a good number of leftovers and some fresh baked-goods in case she meant to be on her own for the weekend. Brianna got her coffee made and broke into the cinnamon rolls Fiona insisted she take, all but taking one out of Roger’s hand to give her the fresh batch the night before. It brought a smile to Bree’s face as she thought about Roger quickly scarfing down the freshly frosted bun before he was required to relinquish it. She’d been so busy with the workers since she got there that she hadn’t even had the chance to look around.

With her second mug of coffee in hand, she started her tour of the house. She stopped for a moment at the entrance to the utility room on her way out, leaning against the wall as she scanned the space where the kitchen was being assembled. The fireplace on the far wall caught her eye. It was considerably smaller than the kitchen hearth, and at floor level, but Bree could imagine briskly rubbing her hands together above the flames and turning her back to a roaring fire to toast her backside. It was a shallow fireplace. She knew it was similar to what in New England was called a Rumford fireplace, but this quite likely pre-dated those by many years. No matter what, though,
she knew it would throw a great deal of heat into the room if a fire was lit in it.

Scanning to the left, Bree noted various bits of construction clutter, but it looked like the men had endeavored to clean up the space before they left for the weekend. Several sheets of plywood were leaned against one wall, with sawhorses stacked three high in front of them. Bree counted twelve. Wake had told her a number of the men usually gathered for lunch in the house, and the sawhorses and sheets of plywood would make quick, sturdy tables, and could be cleared away like they were without much difficulty. She hadn’t witnessed it herself, yet.

Bree headed to the far end of the house – which used to be the very front of the house before her redesign turned it all around inside. She still wasn’t sure what she was going to do with the lady’s parlor, but the room across the hall, a room that had been an office, a study, a library, a man’s retreat; that room was set up right now in very familiar terms for Brianna. A drawing table sat pushed to one side, against the wall. Another stunning fireplace and surround filled the far end of the room. Bree walked up to the drawing table, finding the blueprints for Lallybroch laid across it. Bree leafed through the pages, surprised to find the copies of her original, hand hewn sketches under the plexi-glass top on the desk. They were arranged like wallpaper, tiling the surface, but protected from any damage. Wake had taken great care with the copies, reproducing them in high resolution so one could even see the individual pencil strokes. A warm feeling went through her body.

“Oh, Wake,” she hummed, putting her hand on the clear cover.

~~~~~

With time of her own, Bree decided to begin setting up house. Food items she’d shipped from home were carted to the utility room, near the make-shift kitchen, until the shelves in the pantry section were installed. She set up a pop-up laundry hamper garnered at the dollar store in her bedroom, and took all her toiletries to the bathroom. Little sundries, collected in an old jewelry box, were placed by her bed side, but not before she opened the box and removed the pearl handled folding knife Jamie had given her for venturing into ‘unfamiliar territory’. She slipped it into the rule pocket of her carpenter jeans, wanting to have it by her side, not that she thought she would need it, but it was like having Jamie with her.

With everything else put in place, Bree tackled her greatest challenge – unpacking her clothes and setting up her closet.
Bree was beginning to forage through the leftovers Fee had offered up when she thought she heard a knock on her door. Her heart began to pound. She wasn’t expecting anyone, and she was all alone for nearly the first time since that first night she’d arrived. She cautiously poked her head out of the utility room, listening for another knock. She heard three loud rasps.

“Bree?”

She exhaled and put her hand on her heart.

“Wake.”

She walked to the door quickly and pulled it open.

“We’ll be late for dinner, come on,” Wake cajoled.

“I thought I was on my own for the weekend. Your mom loaded me up with leftovers.”

“Och, well, I have come all this way…and a…hot meal would be preferable, would it not?” he enticed.

She acquiesced with a nod.

“Yeah, it would. Wait a minute, I’ll get my coat.”

Wake happily escorted Brianna to his truck, opening the door for her and closing it once she was in. Bree could feel her cheeks burning, and couldn’t help thinking he was too good to be true.

~~~~

“Are you the only one who goes home for dinner?” Bree asked as they rode.
“Nah, the others drop in – Jem more than the rest. My sisters have their hands full with their own bairns, and Rabbie is off god knows where, but we all get drawn back to Mam’s table at one time or another, and the occasional family gathering is not unknown. Da tries to get us in with movie nights, but I’m sure Mam’ll bring you in the next time we gather, if you think ye can handle us all,” he replied with a grin.

“Should I be scared?” Bree chortled.

“We’re mostly harmless,” he teased back.

~~~~~

“Are we late?” Bree asked Roger as she entered the manse.

“Right on time – I’m glad ye decided to come, and not stay locked up in your ivory tower.”

“I can’t do that until the tower is redone,” Bree said with a broad smile, walking with Roger’s arm around her shoulder into the kitchen.

“Look who’s come,” he appealed to Fiona.

Fee gave a quick nod, but was absorbed in her cooking for the moment.

“Hey Mam,” Wake greeted, wrapping his arms around her from behind and bending down to kiss her, “Miss me?”

“You’d have to go somewhere if I was to miss ye,” she dismissively retorted.

She stirred the contents of several pots, turning off the burners and letting one pot continue to simmer while the other was whisked off the heat and promptly poured into a colander in the nearby sink. That task done, and dinner well in hand, Fiona turned her attention to Brianna.

“So, Bree dear, have you had the chance to settle in a little, get unpacked?”
Bree smirked broadly, sitting back, crossing her arms across her chest and her legs under the table. Her gaze was focused on Wake.

“I thought I’d be living out of my suitcases until I managed to put everything away myself. Imagine my surprise when I finally open my closet door, and find it full of all the clothing I shipped. And not haphazard or just shoved in there – I can’t organize a closet so nice,” Bree effused, leaning in across the table, smiling at Wake.

“Och, well…you had enough to handle upon arrival, and I found myself with time on my hands on the weekends before you came, so…” Wake smirked back.

“Thank-you…again.”

“Whatever I can do,” Wake declared.

Bree stood and sidled her way between the table and the counter.

“Be right back,” she softly offered.

Roger leaned in on his elbows and Fiona quickly turned from the stove as Brianna retreated to the bathroom, neither of them speaking until they heard Bree hit the stairs going up.

“You’re really feathering the girl’s nest – like those birds in that documentary Rabbie narrated a couple years back. I’d expect it of him,” Fiona charged.

“Aye, and that lass is not the woo and forget type. She’s as close as family,” Roger added.

“I did some of her unpacking, big deal…Seriously, the crates were taking up space – I admit, I hoped to learn a little something about her but…I couldna bring myself to go through her keepsakes. It felt like an invasion, but…her clothing – there was nothing intimate, jeans, t-shirts, and a shitload of boots and shoes. You did tell me to be nice where she was concerned.”
“There’s being nice, and then there’s being nice, my lad. Tread carefully,” Roger insightfully suggested.

Once again after dinner, they repaired to the study, Bree and Roger on the couch, Fiona in her chair, and Wake standing with his back to the fireplace, warming himself as he swirled a glass of whisky.

“So, Wren, I know it’s been less than a week, but have you had any epiphanies of redesign since moving in at Lallybroch? Something that absolutely willna work for ye?”

Bree refocused her attention on Roger and grinned.

“Actually…”

“Have I opened a whole kettle of fish?” Roger inquired, reaching his hand out to hers and touching it lightly, wondering if he was in for a litany.

“Just the one thing so far – replacing the showerhead in the second floor bathroom. It’s so low I’ll turn into a hunchback using it!” Roger and Wake both laughed.

“I did notice that,” Wake mentioned. “I think it’s on the check list.”

“Good – that showerhead is almost beyond help – If I was a foot shorter it might be passable, but I can barely get wet above my chest!”

Wake’s smile now had a partner – a glowing blush on his cheeks as he thought about the water hitting her in the chest and trickling down her body.

“Aye…well,” Wake started, his eyes darting around, not wanting anyone to make eye contact, finally focusing into the whisky glass and taking a quick sip.
“I’ll double check – plumbers are due back to finish in the kitchen – one more fixture shouldna send them into a tizzie.”

That warm feeling rose through Brianna’s body again, and didn’t stop until her scalp was tingling.

~~~~~

Brianna was slowly gaining in confidence each day she was at Lallybroch. The transition between Wake being in charge and Bree being the go-to person on site had gone relatively smoothly. Wake checked in with her several times a day to begin with, making sure she had a handle on things. He wanted very badly for everything to go well. She’d already developed a good rapport with many of the older men, and Wake had had more than one of them come up to him in the pub on the weekend and tell him how Brianna reminded them of their daughters or mothers. In short order, Wake and Bree were having one meeting before the day got into the swing of things and one meeting before he left for the night to review the next day’s schedule and troubleshoot any difficulties she’d come across during the day.

Wake continued to ferry Bree to and from the manse for dinners. They were starting to feel comfortable with each other, and Wake did his level best not to ruin what he felt was slowly building between them. She was coming into her own. Her capabilities were becoming obvious to everyone, and no one was gladder of that than Wake. It also freed him up to begin working on the tower – something he’d been chomping at the bit to get started on from the moment he and Bree shook hands on their initial agreement.

~~~~~

Brianna wasn’t dressed for the day, having gotten a bit of a late start, but what she wore to bed was easily mistaken for street clothes, so when she heard the knock, she didn’t hesitate to open the door. She smiled when she saw William Wakefield MacKenzie, or Wake, as he’d instructed her to call him on that day they first met.

“What can I do for you this morning?” she asked.

There was a hesitation before he spoke as he cleared the image that flashed into his head of the two of them pressed against the stone of the tower ravaging each other.

“In lieu of the morning meeting I…um…I was wondering…would you…like a lesson in laying…
stone, that is. Always good to have a working knowledge of all the trades under you.’’

He gulped and turned momentarily red as he heard only the subtext of his words.

“Sounds fun. Let me get dressed and I’ll join you.”

His eyes bulged. The thought that she was not dressed reminded him of finding her by the mill, and he looked her up and down. She seemed quite dressed to him.

“Aye,” he gulped, backing away from the door.

A few minutes later, Brianna emerged from the house dressed for the day, and Wake almost fell over when he saw her. She was wearing blue jeans that were virtually painted on her body, the thighs so threadbare they were sheer. A flannel shirt in a non-tartan plaid with the bottom tied up around her waist, and the sleeves turned to the elbows covered a tight tank shirt, and her hair was loosely pulled back under a baseball cap. She smiled at her perception of his reaction, quite pleased to think he liked what he saw.

“Ready?” she bubbled eagerly, finding his eyes and smiling broadly right at him.

“Aye… ready,” he echoed, completely taken with her.

~~~

“You still lookin’ for a car?” Wake asked as they made their way to the tower.

“Yes!” she replied, eyes opening wide. “Do you know of something?”

“Actually, a mate of one of my roomies is selling his business van – the business went under, and he wants rid of the reminder. It’s got some miles on it, from what I hear, but it would get you from place to place until something better comes along.”

“And it would let you off the hook for driving me around,” Bree said, matter of fact.
Wake blushed and smiled.

“Aye,” he mumbled, knowing he would miss having the need to drive her to civilization and back.

“I’ll see about setting a meeting for the car then, shall I?” Wake asked.

“Would you?” she chirped as she smiled broadly.

“Aye, not to worry.”

They’d reached the base of the tower now, and Bree was a bit taken aback.

“What happened?”

“There was a minor collapse in one quadrant, and I thought it sensible to rebuild from the bottom. I’ve laid out the stones in order, so if you’ll hand me the stones as I restack and mortar, we should get this filled in right quickly. Here,” he said as he offered Bree a pair of gloves.

After handing about five stones to Wake, Bree shed the gloves.

“You giving up on me?” Wake asked.

“I can’t hang onto anything in those. Just have to go at it the old fashioned way, and let the callouses form where they may.”

Wake chuckled and nodded. Bree was no shrinking violet, definitely not afraid to get her hands dirty. They worked well together, intuiting each other’s movements until the repair had been completed.

“That needs to set up before we go any higher or we might get a blowout and have to start all over.”
Brianna nodded.

“Lunch, then?” Wake asked, gauging the time by looking for the sun’s position in the sky, and then back at Bree as he rubbed as much of the mortar off his hands as could be done. He was crouched down, putting his tools in order as Bree took a few steps closer.

“Your mom sent me home with half a roast chicken last night, and explicit directions on how to reheat it. Will you join me?”

“She does know you doona have a real oven yet?”

“She asked the dimensions of the toaster oven – I had no idea, but she divined the proper size after asking me what I had cooked in it!”

Wake shook his head.

“She’s putting you on.”

“What makes you say that?”

“She knows very well what will and willna fit in that toaster oven from sending packets home with me!”

Brianna raised an eyebrow.

“That was your toaster oven?...and the rest of it?”

“Aye.”

“You gave me…”
“I did – I didna need it, but you did,” he played off, feeling caught by his kind act.

“It was…quite…chivalrous.”

Bree looked at him quite warmly.

Wake stood, leaving very little space between them. Bree’s whole body shivered. Wake wanted to kiss her. They were alone and far from anyone else at work on the property. He began to reach out for her, wanting to cradle her cheek in his palm and draw her into a kiss. He wanted to leave her breathless and rubber-limbed. Her guard was down. He wanted…

Like a shadow beneath a quickly moving sun, Brianna moved out of reach, almost stumbling back down the incline toward the house.

“I’ll…I’ll go get the food warming,” she offered as she took several more steps backward, keeping her eyes on Wake.

~~~~~

Bree made it back to the house and managed to get the roast chicken out of the mini-fridge before she felt it hit her. Wake had tried to kiss her again. She closed her eyes as her heart pounded. There were so many times when they were Skype-ing she longed to be there with him. Bree did want to kiss him, but she also didn’t wish to send him the wrong message. What worried her more were the messages darting through her mind and body – ones that were urging her to give in, ones that screamed in the back of her head to take a chance.

“No,” she admonished herself, “I’m not ready for that.”

She shook off the feelings that were trying to swamp her just as Wake made it to the house. He looked a bit apprehensive as he entered the utility room, but went straight to washing up. Bree was keeping herself busy getting plates and silverware and setting them out on the small table. Wake stood over the deep set tub where he had been cleaning up his hands, thinking how to break the silence.
“I’ll soak my head while I’m at it if you wish it,” he offered in penance for his actions by the tower, slowly turning his head and lifting his eyes to look at her.

She simply shook her head and flashed the slightest smile. For the moment, their magnetic attraction had had a polar shift, keeping them at an emotional distance, but one unexpected turn away from careening into each other.

~~~~~

Just short of three weeks into her first professional project, Brianna had become well absorbed in her work, and the yo-yo emotions of dealing with Wake face to face. Scotland was so different from what she had expected, except for the weather. While the weather in New England could change in five minute’s time, Bree was amazed at how many different speeds the rain could fall, and how unless it was an absolute deluge, work went on.

Bree had pitched in, helping and learning about each trade, not wanting to come off as just the boss, and truly fascinated by it all. Today was a big day – the kitchen was getting fitted out. Appliances were dollied into place, sinks installed after the countertops were fastened down. It was a far cry from the makeshift appliances in the utility room, but Bree smiled, thinking how Wake had given those to her to his own detriment. She’d kinda miss using those, knowing what a kind gesture was behind them, but as the new kitchen came to life, Brianna was enthralled with the way it looked. To see it come off the paper, designed by her hand, and to now be standing in the middle of it, it was astounding. Bree wished she had someone to hug and celebrate with, but would have to be content in the knowledge that things were progressing, and that she could now make her morning coffee in a well lit room, instead of a concrete bunker.

~~~~~

When Brianna and Wake reached the manse, she bolted from the truck and into Fiona’s kitchen.

“They installed the kitchen today,” Bree enthused.

“Och,” Fiona toned, opening her arms to the young Fraser. Brianna wrapped her arms around Fee, finally having someone to celebrate with who was safe to hug without it meaning anything more.

“Finally…I can send ye home with proper meals!” Fiona informed her.
Wake made his way into the kitchen and saw Brianna hugging his mother. He let out a puff, like he’d been punched in the gut. He watched longingly as they rocked side to side, locked together. He would have gladly been on the receiving end of Brianna’s joy, but it was not to be. Even if Bree felt free to give him a hug, he was covered with spots and splotches that became dusty as they dried. It was getting more difficult to be around her without doing something about those feelings.

“Da, I’m gonna slip upstairs for a shower. I’m a bit messed up.”

Roger did an upward nod of acknowledgement.

“Need to borrow a change of clothes?”

“I’ve got something in the truck, so…” Wake nodded and pressed his lips together.

He sighed once again.

“Wish you were on the other end of that hug, don’t ye?”

Wake shot a pained look at his father.

“Aye,” he sadly breathed out.

Roger patted him on the shoulder, watching after him as he headed back out to the truck. It was a side of Wake that seldom reared its head, but Roger was actually glad to see it. Wake was seriously miserable, and that meant he really cared.

~~~~~

“You’ll still be coming to eat with us, won’t you?” A concerned Fiona inquired.

“Of course I will. I’m not going to have time to whip up full meals for myself…but I wouldn’t mind if you taught me some more of your recipes – I did pretty good with your pot roast when I was back in Boston.”
“Good for you,” Fiona said with a smile and a squeeze around Bree’s waist.

Roger’s steps on the linoleum caught Fee’s ears.

“Has Wake gone off?”

“Just collecting a change of clothes from his truck, hen. He’s gonna duck into the bath and get freshened up before he joins us.”

“Well…there’s a first time for everything!” Fee teased her absent son. “He was always the hardest one to coax into a bath,” she said as an aside to Brianna who smiled and blushed.

~~~~~

Damp, but refreshed, Wake joined the rest for dinner, looking worn out and a bit down.

“You’re not coming down with anything, are you?” Fiona asked, placing her hand on Wake’s forehead.

“Being in charge is taxing, but not tiring, whereas stone work takes it all out of ye.”

Bree nodded in agreement.

“So far, the hardest work I’ve done was helping with the restoration of the tower. A two by four might be heavy, but it’s spread over a distance. The stones – heavy and difficult to manipulate. It’s also the dirtiest job on the site, so I understand needing to shower.”

Wake smiled appreciatively, then looked down, continuing to smile. It would be a real shame if he didn’t end up with a woman who understood him that well, he thought.

“Thanks,” Wake finally said after a rather lengthy pause.
Wake and Brianna were deeply ensconced on opposite ends of the couch, both leaned back into the cushions, eyelids at half-mast. Roger sat between them and assumed the same posture. Sweaters and a roaring fire were still fitting even in mid-May, so the toasty confines of the study were comforting.

“So, Bree…” Fiona brought her alert with.

Brianna’s eyes came fully open and she sat up a bit, reading something in Fiona’s tone.

“I’ve been keeping yer folks updated on your progress and such, but yer mam would appreciate hearing your voice.”

Bree opened her mouth to speak when Fiona put up her hand to stop her.

“I know…you’re just getting settled in, and the job is all consuming – I’m not trying to nag or make ye feel bad. But…by the way you dashed in here, all excited to share your news – your mam could use a dose of that enthusiasm right now. She’s feeling a bit rough just now.”

“I think about them every day, but it’s always at the wrong time, and I don’t want to wake her up with a call in the middle of the night. I’ll make myself a note. If I call mid-morning, I should be able to catch mom at work.”

“Don’t leave your da out – he misses you, too. I saw for myself the depth of that man’s love for you, and having to let you go so soon after finding you…” Fiona shook her head.

Bree’s cheeks were pink, embarrassed that she’d let this much time go by without calling home. Only that first night after she’d landed had she called home.

“I’ll tell them to expect a call or two in the next week, shall I?”
Bree nodded, trying very hard not to break down.

~~~~~

Bree was still feeling raw on the ride back out to Lallybroch. Fiona had been right and Brianna felt embarrassed that she’d let her new circumstances keep her from calling home and making sure her parents were alright. She was quiet on her side of the truck cab, letting silent tears cascade down her cheeks in the darkness. Wake glanced from time to time, whenever he could take his eyes off the road. They had just pulled into the yard when Wake heard Bree make the slightest sound. It was a stifled sob. She tried to get out quickly, but had forgotten to unbuckle her seatbelt, and found herself hanging against it, unable to get out of the truck. Wake grabbed for her hand and pulled her back onto the seat, keeping a tight grip on her wrist.

“Have you been cryin’ this whole time?” he gently asked, oddly tearing up himself.

She nodded, keeping her eyes turned away.

Wake pulled her head into his shoulder and put his hand on top of it to hold her in place against him. Any attempt at a façade melted away, Bree’s chest heaving as the sobs came and tears poured down her face. Wake didn’t ask for any explanation, but Bree tried to apologize for the tears as they were in progress.

“Sorry…I…I let myself…get so…wrapped up in what was happening here…I should have called home…let them know what was happening…I…I…”

“Shhh,” Wake soothed, “I ran you off your feet the first week, and then you stepped in to fill my shoes – a job I know takes over your mind. Mam wasnae trying to make you feel like this.”

He felt Brianna nodding as his palm cradled the top of her head.

“I’m sorry,” Bree repeated.

“For what? Having feelings? For bein’ human? Och, don’t fash over that. You’ve got a lot on your plate just now. Remember what I said after that run-in with one of the workers? – One day at a time. You’ve found your footing, now you’re just left finding a balance between your life here, and your family in America.”
He felt her pull away, back to sitting upright. She unbuckled her seatbelt and sat slumped forward for a few minutes, thinking about what he said.

“Know what? My advice, wash your face, call your mam, even if it is late, or early as the case would be, then take a shower with that brand new showerhead that got installed today. You’ll feel better come morning.”

“Thank-you…and…um…could you not tell anyone about this? I feel foolish, and I’d rather not have anyone else know how easy it is to make me cry.”

“My lips are sealed – not even mam will know.”

She managed a quick flash of a smile and successfully exited the truck this time. Wake just sat there, reveling in the fact that, on some level, she trusted him, and that was a good foundation to build upon.
Wake’s advice had been helpful. Bree stood in the shower with her head bowed, letting the water hit her shoulders until she felt the tightness ebb. She was physically exhausted, but her mind was racing. Bree headed down to her newly installed kitchen. She opened the ovens, ran water in the sinks, looked over her cooktop, even basked in the wide open emptiness of her pristine refrigerator. They all called out to be tried – inaugurated into service, and Bree could think of no better way than her signature dessert – brownies. She raided her larder, bringing forth those items she would need and peppered the countertop with them. Despite knowing her recipe by heart, she placed the card on the counter so she could track her ingredients and steps.

The chocolate seemed to take forever in melting, but Bree dared not get distracted and burn it. It smelled heavenly as the squares finally succumbed to the heat. Brianna scraped every last bit of the chocolate into the bowl with shortening and sugar that she had creamed together, mixing it until the stripes of color homogenized. She stopped to take in a lung-full of the aroma of vanilla before pouring a liberal teaspoon…or two…into the bowl as well. It came together quickly, and even though it contained a great deal of raw egg, Bree still plunged her finger into the completed batter and sighed with delight as she licked it clean. It was hard to believe that an essentially empty room she came down to that morning, was now a full-fledged kitchen.

She sat at her new kitchen table for the first time. Everything was so spacious. As she waited for the brownies to bake, she found a random sheaf of paper, and began scribbling some notes.

“Damn, I still haven’t figured out the time difference. I got it backward. If I call in the afternoon it would be too late. Mom’s on her way to work already, unless Jamie has convinced her to stop working…NAH!”

The brownies were done, and Brianna was letting them rest for a bit before she dived in. It gave her time to make a pot of fresh coffee, and think about things. She didn’t want to worry Jamie by calling at what he knew would be a late hour in Scotland, but she really did want to hear his voice. She’d put so much out of her mind when she left Boston, afraid she would constantly be in tears if she thought about what she was leaving, but she’d broken the seal and cried in front of Wake. And maybe it would be easier if she spoke to Jamie first – she’d feel the guilt through the phone if she talked to her mother!

Two brownies in, Bree felt the calming effects of chocolate, and it buoyed her confidence. Time without access to a real oven had not dulled her baking skills, but time without her parents had dulled her daughter skills, and those skills were in flux anyway. She’d had a lifetime with her mother, but only months with her father, and being out on her own, really out on her own, for the
first time had thrown everything off-kilter.

“Out on my own doesn’t mean I’m alone,” Brianna told herself, realizing she’d almost isolated herself in an effort to keep her fears at bay.

Bree picked up her phone. It was just after midnight, six PM in Boston. Jamie should be making dinner and anticipating Claire’s return home for the day. It rang, and Bree gulped waiting…a little fearful. It rang three more times.

“Breee-anahhh?” burred loudly in her ear.

“It’s me,” she replied, feeling a tear come to her eye.

“Say more, I’ve missed your voice,” Jamie entreated.

“I don’t know what to say…I’m sorry it took me so long to call.”

“Oh, Fiona’s told us how busy you’ve been, and I knew once you got stuck into things, Lallybroch would have your focus.”

“I still feel bad that it took me this long, and Fiona had to remind me. It doesn’t feel like I’ve been gone that long.”

“Time flies, as you say…Does that mean it’s been goin’ well?”

“Oh my God, it’s been amazing. They put in the kitchen yesterday – I made brownies.”

“Of course you did,” Jamie chortled.

Brianna could hear his smile, and it put one on her face as well.
“Fiona’s been keeping you fed while you waited on that kitchen, then?”

“In part. I had sort of a…dorm kitchen – Wake set me up with an assortment of little appliances so I could make my coffee and reheat leftovers Fee sends me home with,” Bree gleefully shared.

“This Wake, he’s done honest work for ye?”

Bree hesitated for a moment, feeling her heart speed up.

“Fee and Roger have made sure he’s kept his promises, and…he’s been very supportive.”

“Good to hear – you sound braw.”

“I am, and I’ll try to call more often – I could send pictures as well – show you how the house is progressing – would you – “

“Yes” he said, cutting her off, “That would be…almost as good as hearing your voice. I’ve kept your drawing table set up in the foyer with a set of plans…I’m so proud of you. If attending to your job means there’s some time between your calls, I can deal with it, but your mam needs to touch base more often.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Physically, she’s fine.”

“But…” Bree inflected, wanting to draw more of an explanation out of Jamie.

“Her emotions…they vary…She’s also been eating like a horse – or should I say she could eat A horse – daily!”

“Who, on earth, are you saying that to?” Claire’s voice clearly rang out as Jamie chortled again, the deep reassuring tones vibrating Bree’s ear.
“Your mam is home, let me put her on the phone.”

“It’s Bree,” she heard in muffled tones as the phone was being passed.

“Bree?” Claire’s voice chimed.

“It’s me – are you OK?”

“I am now, oh, Sweetie, you don’t know how good it is to hear you. Talk to me as I’m on my way to get changed.”

“I’m sorry – I was telling Jamie, I didn’t mean for it to take so long, I just got so busy, and I still can’t get a handle on the time difference. The kitchen was installed today.”

“That should make it feel more like a home,” Claire said.

“It does already,” Bree confirmed, “…I love it here.”

“I’m so glad – it always felt like home to me.”

Claire let a sigh of relief as she slipped off her shoes.

“My feet – I forgot what being pregnant did to my feet, and I’ve most of the third trimester to go yet.”

“Jamie said you were fine – but…”

“I am fine, it’s your father who’s worrying, but I think he may have found a way to manage his fears – he’s begun meditating and doing yoga. Now that the weather is improving, he goes out on the patio and…”
“Ties his body in knots instead of his mind and heart?” Bree proposed.

“Exactly. It doesn’t help all the time, but he’s been calmer, more at peace.”

“I wish I could be there, to tell him everything is going to be alright – it seemed to help.”

“It did help.”

Brianna yawned loudly into the phone.

“My sleepy girl – would you like me to sing you to sleep like I did when you were little?” Claire offered.

“I fall asleep as soon as I hit the pillow these days – going from academic labors to physical labors just wipes me out…and it is after midnight.”

“I should let you go, then – you can call me at work, you know, or even Skype. Stay in touch.” Claire sounded a bit teary.

“I promise, mom, I won’t take so long next time. Tell Jamie I love him – and I love you too, mom.”

“I love you, Bree. Get enough sleep – I want you bright-eyed in the morning for work!”

“Will do – I’ll be back before you know it to meet my brother or sister.”

“I know…goodnight.”

They each reluctantly ended the call, holding onto the phones in their hands.
“Be safe,” Claire whispered, pulling the phone to her chest.

Claire made the climb back up to the kitchen, Jamie’s phone in hand.

“You’ve said your goodnights, then?”

“Bree was sleepy, so I let her go. Did you have something more you wished to discuss with her?”

“Nah, just…I will never get enough of her…her voice, her arms around me, the beating of her heart.”

Jamie took in and released a deep breath, thinking of his daughter. Just as Claire handed his phone back, it made a sound.

“Has she called again?” Claire asked.

The smiled crept up one side of Jamie’s face.

“Pictures of the kitchen,” he elucidated. “She’s promised to send me pictures of the restoration as it happens, so I can see what she’s up to when she can’t call and tell me. I think talking to us makes the separation…too real, but sharing her work makes her feel closer – because she’s building it for…us.”

Claire nestled into Jamie’s arms.

“I know how hard it is for you to be separated from Bree so soon after finding her.”

“No harder than it is for you, Sassenach – she’s shared a life with you…even…shared…a body with you…saying goodbye after such an experience of togetherness…”
“But as Bree reminded me...she’ll be home soon, and we’ll be a family of four for a time, under the same roof, just a hug away.”

“Aye,” Jamie sighed, looking out over Claire’s head, haunted look in his eyes.

“Family of four.”

~~~~~

“Hey Cass, just calling to let you know I’m back in Scotland. I wanted to touch base before you think I’m a bad friend – I’ve already been a bad daughter. We should get together, but right now I’m kinda stuck here at Lallybroch, but I’m sure we can figure something out.”

Bree put down her phone and picked up her coffee cup.

“I hate voicemail,” she mumbled.

Bree sat back, one elbow on her new kitchen table, looking at the light streaming in through the windows high on the wall behind her countertops, and one large picture window behind her sinks. Another day had dawned, and she was waiting for Wake to arrive to begin the day. Crying into his shoulder the night before left her with butterflies in her stomach as she waited for his arrival. Her walls had crumbled in front of him, but he hadn’t taken advantage, he’d only been supportive and helpful. Now the butterflies were on fire as she thought about how wonderful he’d been to her, how wonderful he’d been from day one. The feelings that were cropping up as she thought about Wake were confusing and unfamiliar, but she couldn’t say it was unpleasant.

~~~~~

Fortified with a second cup of coffee, Bree was ready to face the day, and Wake. They took to the study, going over the plans once more, standing shoulder to shoulder. There were a few awkward smiles at the start, but the nervousness wore off as they dug into building details.

“They got the framing done for the bathroom in the corner of the kitchen,” Bree informed Wake.
“Are you sure about that? – I mean having the full bath there?”

“It will be the only bathroom on the ground floor – I can see occasions where it would come in handy, like if you don’t want to track mud through the whole house – My mom loves gardening, and more than once at our house just outside Boston, she made a muddy mess of herself, and had to track to the upstairs bathroom to clean up – even after slipping her shoes off it was a trail that took forever to sweep clean.”

“She really throws herself into her work, aye?” Wake said with a smile, “She passed that trait along.”

Bree’s heart thumped. He was doing it again, making her feel warm in places she wasn’t used to. She reached her hand out to the drawing table, inadvertently placing her hand on top of Wake’s.

“Oh, sorry,” she quickly apologized, moving her hand over to an unoccupied spot, tracing out a line on the plan.

“It will be a while before you can get the plumbers back out here,” Wake advised.

“I know,” Bree said rather breathily, recovering from her unintended brush with his hand.

They finished their morning meeting, not a second too soon for Brianna this day, after tackling a few more topics, and Wake was on his way out when he turned back.

“Oh, I’ve spoken to the guy selling that vehicle we talked about. I’ve potentially scheduled a meeting for this weekend, if you’re available.”

“I can’t go anywhere without you.”

Bree sucked in a nervous breath, hearing how that sounded.

“Aye,” Wake smirked, “We’ll go just before dinner, if you’re still…joining us?”
His hands found each other, like he was praying, his eyes full of hope.

“I still only have leftovers here. I haven’t shopped since I’ve been here – I’m probably going to have to ask Fee where the shops are!”

“Aye,” he smirked once more, reassured that, for the time being, he’d be breaking bread with her each night.

~~~~~~

The closer it got to Wake’s arrival on Saturday afternoon, the more antsy Brianna became. If things worked out, she’d have her own transportation – freedom to go places and do things without asking someone to take her – without relying on Wake so much. Bree wondered if her dependence on Wake to get from place to place was fostering some of the odd warm feelings she got when they were talking. He was sort of her white knight right now, and she was afraid it might be coloring her perception of the man. She bolted from the house when she heard Wake’s truck, eager to see what kind of vehicle could be in her future. He’d told her what it was, but she didn’t recognize the name. All she recalled was that it was a Ford. Wake didn’t even have time to turn off the engine before Bree was sitting next to him with a broad smile on her face.

“Hi,” she chirped, excitedly twitching like a bird ruffling out her feathers.

“I won’t ask if you’re ready; it’s painted all over your face,” Wake deeply chortled.

He put it in gear, moving one step closer to not being her chauffeur anymore, a hint of sadness in his heart. They didn’t really talk on the way. Bree was almost shaking with anticipation. Wake could hear her breathing, trying to consciously settle herself before they arrived.

“You’ll do fine,” Wake assured her before making the final turn of their journey.

“Thank-you, for this, and everything so far. I couldn’t have…taken on this project without you.”

Wake simply smiled at her and nodded.
“You could have, but I’m glad ye didn’t – here we are.”

Bree took one more deep breath, sitting in the silent truck after Wake turned off the key. He got out, giving her a minute to collect herself.

“When you’re ready,” he burped back over his shoulder as he went and greeted the seller.

She looked in the rear view mirror as Wake and the man selling the car shook hands. She had a moment of revulsion looking at the man, but she shook off the feeling and made a definitive move, both feet dropping firmly to the ground.

“Ah, good, Bree, this is – “

“Boyd,” the man grunted out, extending a hand toward Bree.

“Hi.”

She shook his hand, and fought the urge to wipe her hand off right after.

“Give ‘er a look over,” Boyd offered.

He looked like he just crawled out of bed for this meeting, and that he would be crawling back in the moment they were done. Wake shot her an apologetic look with a touch of a shrug. Brianna walked up to the vehicle and pulled the left side door open, momentarily taken aback that there was no steering wheel.

“Oh, I forgot,” she exhaled with relief, “wrong side,” she turned back toward Wake to say.

Instead of walking around, Bree poked her head in, and walked on her arms deep into the cab of the small van, looking things over as her rear end stuck out, seductively moving side to side, catching Wake’s eye. Wake smiled subtly, enjoying the show, but became indignant when he saw his roommate’s friend eyeing her in the same way. He nudged the man and shook his head at him.
“She’s something, isn’t she?” the would-be car seller commented.

“Aye, she’s my boss, and an old family friend – my parents are her God parents.”

“You her protector then?”

“Just helpin’ her get set up with what she needs. Mam, Da and I have been ferrying her to and fro Lallybroch, and I know she’s itchin’ to be free of us.”

“I’d keep her in need of my services if I were you.”

“I’m sure you would,” Wake barbed.

Bree gave the angular, right hand drive Ford Transit Connect a good look over. Her mind was doing the happy dance, but she sought to contain any outward signs of happiness, hoping to make a good deal.

“I don’t know,” she said as she approached Wake and Boyd.

“It’s not quite what I had in mind.”

One of Brianna’s eyebrows raised. Wake picked up on something in her voice and that wayward brow and jumped in, ostensibly trying to make the sale.

“She’s a fine van – will serve you well…plenty of space to cart furnishings for the house when she’s done.”

“But even with the new road, it’s rough terrain. Do you think this can handle it?” Bree asked Wake.

It was as if the man actually selling the vehicle had faded into nothingness as Wake and Brianna bantered.
“Perhaps a test drive is in order,” Wake recommended, “See how it handles, see if it’s comfortable.”

They both walked toward a door, Bree making sure she was on the proper side to drive it.

“Hey!” the current owner called out.

“You can hold my keys ‘til we get back,” Wake called, tossing his chocked full key chain.

Once they were sealed in the cab, Bree took a deep breath.

“First time for everything,” gushed out in a single breath.

“You do drive?” Wake asked, his eyes widening just a bit, creases of concern etching into his forehead.

“Oh yeah…and Henry and I go way back. I learned to drive in a Ford - just never on this side of a car,” a worried Bree answered.

“Och,” Wake burred. “Well, give ‘er a try. I’ll talk you through any rough spots, need be.”

Bree took the small van for a short test drive, Wake only having to ‘em’ a few times as his nerves got the better of him. Out of sight of the man trying to make the sale, Bree pulled to the side of the road.

“I do like this thing, whatever you call it…is it worth what he’s asking?” Bree inquired, hoping Wake would give her a straight answer.

“Make him throw in four new tires, and get it thoroughly cleaned – and I mean thoroughly. He wants rid of it.”

“Thank-you,” she warmly toned, placing her hand on Wake’s where it rested on his thigh.
He began leaning in, feeling pulled into a kiss. She bit her bottom lip as she looked away from his deeply boring gaze. She slowly and carefully retracted her hand and placed it back on the steering wheel. Returning to where Wake’s truck was waiting, the pair of them exited the cab.

“Is there anything I should know, any problems you had with it?” Bree flatly asked.

“It’s no good to have sex up front – not enough room.”

Bree blushed, but held herself together, remembering Wake’s advice.

“Replace the tires, get it cleaned, knock five hundred off the price, and I’ll take it.”

She stood confidently, take it or leave it look on her face. Wake had to turn away, as he felt a wave of delighted laughter coming over him. She was so damn able to switch on that unflappable visage, that commanding presence. It was all the more impressive to watch knowing she could be so shy and unsure. He was more impressed with her by the day.

~~~~~

“Did it not work out?” Fiona asked as Bree and Wake ambled into her kitchen.

“He’s going to drop my new car, truck, whatever it answers to, off in a few days. I hope it’s OK that he brings it here?” Bree questioned.

“Of course, dear.”

Bree had her lips pinched tight.

“Something else?” Fiona intuited.

“Could you, or somebody, ride shotgun with me for the drive to Lallybroch? Just to keep me on the
proper side of the road?”

Wake chortled.

“Perhaps we should have Da run her through his drivers training course – he did teach each of us to drive,” he added, informing Brianna, slight tilt to his head.

“I know how to drive,” Bree protested, her hands defiantly clamping her hips, elbows jutting out sharply on each side.

“You know how to drive in America,” Wake corrected, assuming the same posture and attitude Brianna had thrown at him.

“I never should have said anything,” Bree grumbled, turning and stalking off to the study.

Wake was hot on her heels.

“Hey…Bree…I meant nothing by it – you did ask. I just want you to be safe.”

He caught up and spun her by the shoulders. They were just arm’s length apart, and Wake took a step closer, his elbows framing her chest. The draw he felt as he studied her face – she wasn’t looking away, but she gulped nervously. He had just started leaning in for a kiss when Roger came in carrying today’s well-thumbed newspaper.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” Roger brightly offered.

Wake let Bree go quickly, feeling her pull away, and he whispered a breathy, “sorry.”

She nodded shakily, not quite sure why he was apologizing, but knowing she felt something when he touched her.

“You two staying to dinner?” Roger asked.
“I am,” Bree answered, trying to distance herself from any joint declarations.

“Until this one has her own wheels, I go where she does…speaking of which – “

“Yeah, Roger,” Bree usurped the conversation, “could you help me get used to driving on the wrong side of the road?…I bought…a car…and…”

“And you learned the American way,” Roger averred. “Give us a hug.”

Bree shyly nodded, then cast a sly, almost wanting look at Wake as Roger pulled her into the safety of his arms.

“Och, don’t fash, we’ll get you taught right,” Roger promised.

Wake held his breath until he was back in the kitchen.

“Mam? How long until we eat?”

“I’ve been makin’ you meals for how long? You know when it’s time to eat even from across town!”

Wake kissed Fiona on the top of the head and headed out.

“I’ll be back in time,” Wake called back up the hall, needing to go somewhere to unburden himself.

~~~~~

“Knock, knock, got a minute?” Wake asked as he poked his head into the room.
“Wake…what can I do for you, brother?” Jem replied.

“She’s going to drive me crazy,” he divulged as he came in to sit across the desk in Jem’s church office.

“Who?” Wake tilted his head and raised an eyebrow back at Jem.

“Brianna.”

“Och, what’s she done now to get you so inflamed?”

“I took her to see about getting her own vehicle, so she can start getting around on her own, and not depending on Mam, Da, and me so much. And it was going well, she’d asked my advice, confided her thoughts, I thought finally…finally we’re back on the right track after the way she pulled back after landing in Scotland, coming here. When she put her hand on my thigh…I…it was all I could do – well, you know how she makes me feel…”

Jem nodded understandingly, fingers steepled together just below his line of sight.

“You know, I’ve given some thought to why she’s pulled back on you.”

“Do tell, before I’m sitting in a corner repeatedly counting my toes.”

Wake picked the words off his teeth and spat them out.

“Well, you said it was all fine, flirty and sexually charged when you were skype-ing?”

Wake nodded with a sigh.

“That’s because she felt safe – you were thousands of miles away – nothing physical could transpire. There was no ‘what happens next’. But the interactions you are having here will have real world consequences.”
“You think she’s afraid of me?” he asked, horrified at the thought of Brianna seeing some kind of horny monster when she looked at him.

“Not ‘fear’ fear, she’s not frightened of you, per se, but she may well be frightened of her feelings. Perhaps over the computer she was more provocative than she would have dared face to face, but she sees you looking at her like a wolf who’s found a tasty morsel whenever…”

“Whenever she lets her guard down,” Wake finished the thought for his brother, closing his eyes and looking down with the slight shake of his head.

“I can’t help it. And her guard is up most of the time, dealing with all the workers and such, but when she’s with the family…”

Wake looked back up into his brother’s eyes. “If I take things much slower I’ll fall over.”

“It’s only been, what, four, five weeks since she saw you in person again?”

“Three weeks, two days, twenty-one hours and…” he flicked his eyes to the nearest clock, “fifteen minutes.”

“Alright, God Wake, she’s got you good. But, as I was saying, you haven’t been in the same place at the same time all that long - and you canna count when, or how, you met. I doona think you can even count the time spent flirting on the computer. You doona know the reality of Brianna Fraser yet, you only know the fantasy of her – and a lot of that is in your head.”

Wake slid down in his chair and held his hands over his face.

“It’s just…I’ve never felt this way – she’s…”

“She’s worth waiting for, brother,” Jem advised Wake, “And remember, if you hurt her in any way, Ruth will kill you – with her bare hands.”
“God, why did it have to be her?”

“Because that’s how love works, Wake. It grabs your heart, and other parts, and puts them in a vise…Hang in there.”

Jem stood and checked his watch.

“Did any of this help?” Jem asked.

Wake nodded.

“But it doesn’t make it easy.”

“No, it’s never easy. Don’t make Mam angry, get off to dinner now, and be nice to Brianna. If it’s meant to be, it’ll happen.”

~~~~~

Jamie had hung up his robe until Brianna comes home for the baby’s birth, walking the halls in the nude. He thinks I’m sleeping when he slips out of my arms, and sometimes I am, but I always wake. Jamie’s worries run deep. He’s still a wounded man deep in his heart. Considering all he’s seen and lived through – I’ve only dealt with a fraction of the time he has, and I harbor wounds of my own. Bringing Brianna into this world without Jamie was only the first of many trials. Sometimes I cursed him for not being there. I never imagined getting a second chance, never dared dream of a time in which we were together, and a child was coming.

“But I can feel you now, little one.”

The rounder I get, the more Jamie touches me, but he will not initiate sex. He will not refuse me, though, so I am hopeful.

~~~~~
Jamie came back to bed after roaming about. I heard the creak of the steps leading back down here. I turned toward him as he slid under the covers.

“I didna mean to wake ye,” he whispered.

I put my hand on his chest. He was icy to the touch. I would give anything just now if just the touch of my hand could drive him to action, but if I want him tonight, I will need to be a bit more proactive. Seducing a man who sleeps in the nude should be an easy enough task. A random slip of my hand… Jamie’s mouth dropped open and he sucked in a breath. When it looked like he was going to speak, I stopped him, placing a finger to his lips and then kissing him in short order. Again, he didn’t refuse me, but the look on his face was more a look of anguish than one of desire.

~~~

Cassidy and Brianna settled into the booth closest to the door, Bree facing the door. She was tired, but Cass had talked her into coming out tonight to share some face to face talk…and pie.

“So…” Cassidy launched in with as they were still tinged with cold from being outside.

“How’s it been going?”

Bree smiled and nodded.

“Pretty good – it’s hard work, and I’m not even doing the really hard part.”

“Has everyone been treating you well?”

“I can’t complain. Wake’s been amazing and it seems the other men are taking their cues from him.”

Cassidy grinned, but had her attention diverted as the waitress came over.

“Two hot coffees, and a slice of apple and…”
“Oh, I’ll have…chocolate pie,” Bree said after a moment’s thought.

Once the waitress took their order and headed off, Cassidy brought the grin back to her lips.

“So…talk to me about Wake.”

“What do you mean?” Brianna asked, the hair standing up on her arms.

Cassidy twitched her mouth and crossed her arms in front of her on the pub table.

“He’s been very helpful – picked me up from the airport, set up a kitchen and bedrooms I could use – helped me get my transport – and he knows his shit about building,” Bree listed off, not sounding dreamy or sentimental in the least.

Their pie and coffee arrived, causing each of them to lean back from the table to let the items land safely. Bree turned and said, “thank-you”, getting a kind look from the waitress.

Cassidy waited until they were alone again.

“Come on, you know what I mean!”

Bree furrowed her brow and took a sip of her coffee, having been doctoring the cup with cream and sugar unconsciously from the moment it was delivered.

“Don’t pretend to be clueless – the man has seen you naked,” Cassidy said to put Bree in mind of what she was talking about.

“Oh, that,” Bree answered, then quickly took another sip of her coffee.

“Yeah, that, God Bree.”
“I’m trying to keep it a business relationship.”

Cassidy slowly shook her head and finally took the inaugural sip of her coffee. Brianna sliced her fork into her pie and took several bites, the chocolate prompting her to close her eyes and sigh. Cassidy worked on her pie, too. Both pieces of pie had nearly disappeared as Cass grilled Bree about Wake.

“I’m sorry, but you have mentioned him every time we’ve spoken, so I find it hard to believe you are only thinking about him as a ‘business associate’.”

Bree’s cheeks pinked and she looked down, knowing Cassidy was right.

“Hey Bree,” an approaching voice said.

Her heart almost stopped. Brianna flicked her eyes up.

“Wake.”

Bree took in and released a breath.

“You know Cassidy MacLeod,” she said, tilting her head across the table.

“You do look quite familiar, but I’m not sure I’ve had the pleasure,” Wake replied, his hands settling on his hips.

“Our Das have played together for years – in this pub, too.”

“Och, MacLeod – you’re Joe’s daughter – no wonder – nice to officially meet ye. Bree – I thought you were plum worn out.”

“I was assured the best pie I’d ever had, and Cass and I haven’t had a chance to get together since
I’ve been back in Scotland.”

“How is it you two come to know each other?” Wake inquired.

“My dad is her Godfather,” Bree imparted proudly.

“Really, brilliant. Well, be careful getting home – stay on the proper side of the road, now,” Wake teased, his hand gently landing on her shoulder for the briefest moment.

Their eyes locked for that moment.

He disappeared as quickly as he had showed up, like he had been a figment of their shared imagination.

“Shoot, Bree, I’m surprised the sprinklers didn’t go off just now – that man smolders. I thought you two were going to take each other down on the table!”

“I wouldn’t…I haven’t…I don’t…” Bree felt uncomfortable.

“Hey,” Cassidy calmly offered, reaching her hand out to Bree, “Don’t get flustered, but that was some serious flirting.”

“I don’t know how to flirt,” Brianna refuted, “I don’t even know basic flirting.”

“That’s because you jumped right to the master class – Bree, you were throwing off so many sparks.”

Bree seemed to suck inside herself, tucking her head into her chest. She slowly brought her head up, and looked at Cassidy.

“He’s been really nice…and he is very cute,” Bree was willing to admit, “but…”
“All I’m saying is…he’d have you in a heartbeat. Just don’t eliminate the possibility from your mind – and when it does happen, you can tell me all about it,” Cass said with a sheepish grin, quickly shoving the last forkful of pie in her mouth as she flashed her eyes at Bree with delighted wickedness.

Brianna’s mouth dropped open, but the corners turned up into a grin that matched Cassidy’s.

“If…it…happens…” Bree said, the words spaced broadly apart, “I’ll probably need someone to talk to.”

Bree’s expression darkened, and Cassidy sensed something was underlying that comment. She raised an eyebrow, questioning. Brianna looked around. The pub was bustling, and no one was close by. Bree leaned as far across the table as she could, prompting Cass to lean in too.

“When I was sixteen, I…was…I…I was raped…and…I’ve never let anyone…touch me.”

Cassidy re-grabbed Bree’s hand. “Oh, Bree.”

“I couldn’t even hug my dad until…after the tower…Since then, I’ve been trying to let people get…closer to me. It’s still hard to let people get close, but I’ve been trying.” Bree flashed a slight smile, and took another sip of her coffee.

“Does Wake know?” Cassidy asked.

“He could…Fiona and Roger know, so it’s possible, but I don’t know how likely they would have told him.”

“So, when I found you hiding out in the bathroom at the rehearsal dinner…You really were hiding…”

Brianna nodded and bit her bottom lip.

“So, you really didn’t know you were flirting just now.”
Bree shook her head.

“Well, you were.”

“I do like him. He makes me feel weird, but in a good way – God this explains so much. I’ve been flirting with him the whole time, and I didn’t even know it…no wonder.”
Now that Brianna knew she’d been flirting, and had her own transportation, and Wake had heeded his brother’s council, he and Bree each thought to put a little distance between them.

It was nothing anyone could see. They didn’t ignore each other, and still worked just as closely together, but some of the nervousness and fraught moments melted away. Wake had reined in the wanton beast, and Bree was careful with her words and tried to keep notice of her own body language, lest she send him unintended signals.

Work continued at Lallybroch with Bree continuing to throw in with whatever help she could, taking in knowledge at every turn. Wake kept to himself during work hours, staying by the tower, and thereby steering clear of temptation. If not for the fact that Wake checked in with Brianna every morning and every evening, she might not have known he was there at all.

With her own wheels, Bree didn’t always go to Fee’s for dinner, but she really hadn’t stocked her refrigerator either. She just had different kinds of leftovers – take out. Her routine settled. Bree remembered to call home and send Jamie picture updates of the construction. It helped that she got a secondary clock set to Boston time so she always knew what time it was there. She did her best to keep her finger on the pulse of two worlds. It wasn’t easy.

~~~~~

With the house more than livable, the focus switched to the out-buildings. One of the barns was to become a garage to get the vehicles out of sight, while others were to retain their original purposes as actual barns for housing animals and storing crops.

It was all hands on deck once the timber-framing began. It was less about skill and more about brute force and strength to set the main framing beams, and Bree found herself enlisted to hoist one of the behemoths along with any other strong back on the property. Pairs of hands after pairs of
hands pushed up to set a cross beam into the notch that would hold it aloft. It was heavy, everyone staggering a bit under the load.

With the coordination of a crew rowing a Viking ship, they lifted and carried the beam to its final resting place, hearing the satisfying sound of the tenon socking up tight. When the final heavy beam rested in place, and the skeleton of the building stood essentially complete, a roar went up, and those who could still lift their arms did just that in victory. Of the arms that were raised, a number of middle fingers flipped up upon being told there was another frame to erect tomorrow.

Brianna laughed at the scene of expressive appendages, turning to see if the person behind her had been so moved.

“Oh,” she said in surprise, finding that Wake was the person directly behind her.

“I’ve got your back,” he said.

“I thought they’d leave you to the broch,” Bree said with a broad, genuine smile.

Wake leaned in, shielding his words from others as he softly said, “I tried, but they found me hidin’ inside the tower.”

Bree laughed.

“Well, I’m glad they found you.”

Wake smirked and nodded.

“So am I,” Wake uttered, hands turning to fists as he fought not to free that beast that wanted to devour Brianna whole.

~~~~~

“So, we’ve got the timber framing crews for the next week until the out-buildings are ready to roof
and side. And I’m still working along on the broch – though, as you see, I’ve been drafted to help
with the framing, so that takes precedence. And the weather may yet get in the way when it comes
to the tower – carpentry can go on, but if it gets too wet or too cold, the mortar willna set up right.”

Bree nodded.

“What about the fireplaces in the house?”

Wake opened his eyes wide and exhaled heavily.

“Well…that stone hasna arrived – the quarry where the original stone used on the interior work
comes from is only open for a few weeks each year, and we were hoping to match it exactly. I was
planning for it to be my winter project, once workin’ stone outside became near impossible.”

“That’s good to know – I’d kinda wondered, what with the weather – I can’t believe some of the
days the men have worked through!”

“We’re a hearty lot,” Wake replied with an exaggerated burr.

Bree’s face lit up as she laughed. After controlling the impulse to float away on the sound of her
laughter, Wake remembered to pass along a message.

“Oh, mam wants me to make sure you’re coming to dinner next Friday. A big bunch of us are
going to drop by, and she wants you to meet everyone – the whole lot of my nieces and nephews
are supposed to show up – I’ll drive you if ye like.”

“No, that’s OK. I like the feeling of freedom having my own vehicle has given me. I had it for a
while in Boston, but once I was in college, and living in the city itself, it was less convenient than
the T, but out here…”

“I totally understand…so…you’ll be there?”

“You can tell Fee to expect me.”
Wake couldn’t erase the smile from his face as he headed out to his truck. He’d spent some wonderful moments nearly touching her, standing so close behind her as they lifted that beam. He could feel the warmth of her body, and the occasional unconscious bump of her body against his. It had been a good day.

~~~~~

The framing of the outbuildings continued for the next week, taking up all hands. They finally finished the Wednesday before the big MacKenzie family gathering Wake had invited, nearly insisted through Fiona, that Brianna attend.

Bree stuck close to the house for most of Thursday, nursing some sore muscles and a couple of blisters. She found herself thinking about Wake. He’d managed to be behind her whenever they were hoisting timbers into place. She’d gotten used to feeling his body in close proximity, and was actually missing that feeling, and the smell of him now that he was back to working on the tower. It was a long way off, but if Bree squinted and shielded her eyes, she could see Wake from her bedroom window as he worked on the tower, as long as he wasn’t on the other side of it. Watching him became a bit of a guilty pleasure, feeling safe because he was so far away.

~~~~~

“Mam wanted me to make sure you remembered tomorrow’s dinner,” Wake reminded Brianna at the Thursday end of day check in.

“I remember,” she replied in exasperation of yet another reminder.

“Really, she acts like I’m shunning her ever since I stopped coming to dinner EVERY night.”

“I know,” Wake consoled, “she’s good with the guilt, my mam.”

“Sometimes I just need some down time – a chance to think without anyone else’s lips in my ear.”

“I hear that,” Wake shot back.
They smiled at each other, glad to know their thoughts confirmed each other.

“Have you gotten way behind schedule on the tower?” Bree asked, looking at the projected dates for completion.

“A bit, why?”

“I thought I might give you a hand tomorrow.”

“Yeah, brilliant. I’d welcome another set of hands – it’ll be grunt work like the last time – won’t do those blisters of yours any favors,” he pointed out, tilting his head toward her hands.

Bree rubbed at a blister below her thumb, looking at Wake curiously.

“You were rubbing at them when we finished up with the timbers,” he explained.

Brianna smiled and looked down, the wriggly feeling in the pit of her stomach making it a bit hard to breathe regularly.

“Well…I’ll tough it out,” she finally replied, looking up.

Wake nodded, quite pleased with her response.

“I’ll try not to over-work you.”

~~~~~

Brianna knocked on the door of the manse, nervously waiting for someone to open the door. She was surprised when a dark-haired girl close to her own age answered.
“You must be Brianna,” she was greeted with.

“Uncle Wake said you’d be coming for dinner. I’m Iona, Reverend Jem’s daughter.”

“Oh, hello, nice to meet you,” Bree answered.

“Come in, aye?” Iona burbled, stepping out of the doorway.

After dinner, they ambled into the study with much maneuvering as to where each would sit, a conspiracy seemingly in the works to ensure Wake and Brianna ended up seated next to each other.

“What’s happening?” Brianna asked as all eyes turned in the same direction.

“Movie night, my dad’s choice this time,” Wake whispered, playing with where to put his arms to not put one around Bree’s shoulder.

He crossed his arms on his lap, trying to take up less space, and not crowd Brianna. There was a last minute wriggling on the couch, resulting in Bree sitting hip to hip with Wake, and blushing at being wedged up against his body. The lights were dimmed and the movie turned on, and while Brianna was sure she was wide awake and watching, in very little time her eyes had closed and her head gently rested on Wake’s shoulder. One by one, the sons, daughters and grandchildren of Roger and Fiona quietly stole away, leaving just Wake and Brianna on the couch. With the extended space open, Bree pulled her feet up and slowly slid her head from Wake’s shoulder to his lap.

At the end of the movie, Roger turned to ask Brianna if she had enjoyed it, but stopped upon seeing his son’s predicament and worried face in the darkness.

“How do I get out of this?” he whispered.

“Well, my son, you either wake her up, or you sit there and enjoy yourself until she wakes on her own.”
Roger left the room as well, leaving just the two of them there. Wake was drawn to Bree, wanting very much to caress her face, but not at all sure if his attentions would be welcomed. Right then, he would have done anything to be able to carry Bree to his truck, her head remaining in his lap, and get her home and into her bed without disturbing her in the least. And he would have given nearly as much to settle into that bed with her, holding her through all the remaining hours of darkness.

All the latent feelings for Brianna were bubbling to the surface as she softly snorted her breaths. Thoughts of their first meeting were swirling in his mind.

“So, brother,” Wake’s sister Janet began as she came up behind the couch, “Would this be the first time she’s slept with ye? ‘Cause she looks mighty comfortable there.”

“She’s just worn out, ‘tis all. I had her helpin’ me all day carting stone for the tower.”

“Well, somethin’ wore her out.”

“Don’t start spreading gossip like that – there’s not an iota of truth, and you know it!”

“You sound a mite defensive, brother,” she sing-songed as she stalked away, leaving them alone yet again.

Wake’s heart was pounding, half from what Brianna was making him feel, half from denying there were any feelings for her to be had. He looked down at her face, wondering if this was the only chance he would get to see her in the unguarded state of sleep.

Brianna began to stir and stretch, waking feeling warm, but a bit confused.

“What? Where? Oh, God,” she mumbled as her eyes came into focus and Wake’s face became clear looking down at her.

“How long?” she managed.
“Only about an hour,” he reassured her. “No harm done.”

Inexplicably, even to herself, Bree remained laid across his lap as she asked, “Why didn’t you wake me sooner?”

“Well…I would have, except…you looked so…peaceful, and I know you were exhausted and didna really wish to come out tonight.”

Brianna slowly sat up, placed her elbows on her knees and dropped her head into her hands.

“This is so embarrassing,” Bree hissed.

Wake smiled shyly, and unthinkingly placed a hand on each of Bree’s shoulders.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Brianna lurched forward quickly, but fell back to the couch, unable to keep her feet.

“I’ll drive you home,” Wake offered.

“But…my transport…”

“We’ll sort that out later…ye’re in no shape to drive. I’ll go say my goodbyes, and tell mam and da what I’m up to. You get your head together.”

~~~~~

After falling asleep in Wake’s lap, and having spent a portion of the night like that, Brianna was feeling close to him. He had been patient and sweet, and the sleepiness had not totally left Brianna, and so settled on her again once they were in the truck. Wake walked her to the door at Lallybroch, each having taken slow steps, prolonging their time together. Her head felt a bit heavy, and when her balance faltered, she placed her full open palm against Wake’s sternum. It took all the resistance he could muster not to pull her tight and kiss her, even as their faces traced ever so close
“Well, goodnight,” Bree hummed, trying to free herself from the magnetic pull she felt emanating from Wake.

“Aye, goodnight, then.”

They stood there, inches apart, her hand vibrating from the alluring burr of his voice. Part of her wanted very badly for him to kiss her, and part of her was terrified he might try, but Wake wasn’t about to make the first move – he didn’t want to come off as the wanton beast Jem had accused him of being, or at least of looking like through Brianna’s eyes.

Wake took her hand from his chest, squeezed it once, dropped it down and released it by their sides.

“Morning will get here soon,” he offered, “best get to bed.”

“It’s the weekend,” she reminded Wake.

“So it is,” Wake answered, wondering if that was some kind of invitation.

Bree yawned.

“You need the sleep,” he softly instructed.

Bree smiled at him, both relieved and disappointed, then slipped behind the door and closed it.

~~~~~

It wouldn’t be long now until I delivered this baby, and there was much to be done. I’d hoped that by now, Jamie would be happy talking about this baby, and would be beginning to spoil me with unsolicited gifts and necessities for the child. He was doing his best, but certain topics seemed to freeze Jamie in his tracks. I had stopped trying to cajole Jamie into looking at my purchases for our
baby, in fact, I had stopped bringing anything home. There was one decision, however, that I was adamant Jamie participate in.

I was sitting at the little table in the Leoch room, rubbing at my furrowed brow as I poured over the sheets of paper before me. Every name I had ever liked and a plethora of family names were scrawled every which way. I had jotted down the names as they occurred to me, and now had a rather extensive list. Some I knew Jamie would say no to on sight, like Fergus, for there was only one child by that name in our lives. We had briefly discussed names months ago, his reactions pretty much ruling out naming a child after his sister Jenny, and her formal name, Janet. Likewise, I think Ellen, for his mother, would also be ruled out. As for boy’s names, Brian was out, as was William for obvious reasons.

“What’s got your head all scrunched up there, Sassenach?” Jamie asked as he came in with an armload of firewood.

“Names – baby names.”

“Och, well, what’s in a name, Sassenach?”

“You didn’t used to think that way. You were very sure you wanted Brianna named after your father, and I’m very sure I want to talk about this. All I know is that you want Murtagh in the name somewhere, boy or girl.”

Jamie smirked for a moment, remembering when he’d suggested that.

“Whatever you want – “

“No Jamie, please, just look at my lists?”

He dusted the wood crumbs off his chest and ambled over, bending in to look at the names I had written out.

“What’s with the ones that have lines through them?”
“I didn’t like the way they sounded.”

“You practiced scolding them, didn’t ye?”

I smiled and blushed.

“I did,” I admitted.

I hoped keeping things light would encourage Jamie to engage. I sat nervously as he finally picked up the paper and scanned down the page. He flapped it back down, holding it in place with one hand as he took up the pen and neatly struck several names off the list.

“Hmm,” he toned.

“Are ye sure about this one – she’d be tickled pink, but…”

“You’re right, the world isn’t quite ready for another Fiona.”

He struck her name from the running as well.

“Are there any names you’d like to add to the list?”

I saw an impish grin come over his face and he began writing, and writing, and writing. I thought I’d finally broken through, that he’d seen how important this was to me, until I read his list.

“Jamie, what is this? Mars, Bran and Luke? Those were your dogs!! Donas? Sgian Dhu?...Haggis? That was a joke, and the other two, really?”

I exhaled heavily.

“You’re not taking this seriously.”
I wanted to cry, but I held it in.

“You don’t like Roger?” I asked, seeing that he’d struck it off.

“It’ll not matter, Sassenach, like I said before, we only make girls together – boy’s names are a waste of time.”

I shook my head. Mother Nature had a way of throwing you a curve ball, but there would be no convincing Jamie on that point. I had given it one more try. Jamie just wasn’t ready to think beyond my pregnancy.

I assembled my list of names, firsts and middles, and neatly wrote them out on a fresh sheet of paper. Combinations of all Jamie’s names made their way onto the list, interspaced with a few other special names – including Ian, Murtagh, and even several with Andrew or Griffith – for Griff and his father, who had been Jamie’s secret keepers. They had made sure Jamie would still be around for me to find, much like Roger and Fiona had done on my end. Having someone to believe you is an incredible gift.

~~~~~

“Hey Da,” Wake greeted as he breezed into the manse for lunch on Saturday afternoon, “After we eat, could you give me a hand getting Bree’s van back to her?”

“Her ‘transport’, you mean?” Roger corrected.

“Aye,” Wake said with a smirk, “That’s what she calls it.”

“I’ll even gi’ ye a head start, if you want.”

“No need…actually, safer if ye don’t, for everyone concerned.”

Roger placed a comforting hand on Wake’s shoulder accompanied by a conciliatory nod.
“In time,” Roger told him, looking directly into his son’s eyes.

Wake nodded and exhaled, almost deflating as he stood there.

~~~~~

“I’ll take the ‘transport’,” Roger offered, “She’ll be antsy to get her wheels back – are we picking the lass something up to eat?”

“I could call and ask,” Wake replied as a shiver struck him.

A throat clearing behind them had both men turning.

“Hen?” Roger asked.

“Bree hardly ate last night – only two helpings – you take this to her, and don’t leave until you’ve seen her shovel some of it down,” Fiona insisted as she handed over the picnic basket – the same one that had ferried her ‘cure-all’ soup to Bree after her fall through the tower. Roger saluted, garnering himself a quick swat from Fee and a shaking of the head. She smiled as she turned away from them. Exasperating but endearing – a big part of why she loved Roger, and she was sure Wake had those same qualities at work on Brianna.

~~~~~

“Hallo there, Wren,” Roger voiced, then leaned to deposit a quick kiss on her cheek.

“Compliments of Fiona,” he added as he swung the basket out of the passenger seat.

Bree froze for a moment seeing the basket, but took it gingerly in hand when it was proffered.

“We have orders to see you eat some of that before we leave,” Roger quipped, “But I’d be willing
to fib if you let me have some of it instead,” he said endearingly.

Wake stood a few steps back, trying to hide the longing in his eyes each time Roger put an arm around Bree, or gave her a peck on the cheek.

“Would you like to see the new kitchen?” Brianna asked.

“I thought ye’d never ask!” Roger brightly answered.

Wake loped along behind them. He spent every work day in this house, but felt extremely uncomfortable entering the place now. He took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen before his absence became conspicuous. Bree was already setting out a plate for Roger while he unloaded the basket.

“Fee’s been concerned you’ve not been eating enough because she’s not feeding you each night,” Roger offered.

Bree shyly smiled as she returned with utensils.

“I’ll try to drop in more often when the work level drops off,”

“Tell mam she’ll be available next year!” Wake joked.

Bree shot out a loud laugh, then put her hand over her mouth.

“You tell her that, I dare you!” Bree shot back, shaking her head in disbelief he would suggest saying such a thing to Fiona.

Roger’s eyes sparkled listening to them starting to banter.
A small pile of stones was growing, hidden behind a section of the bluestone-capped wall that surrounded the patio. Jamie held one stone in his hand as he knelt by the pile and seemed to be praying. He sighed heavily and placed the stone in his hand onto the pile, resting his hand on top of it for a moment.

“Cuiridh mi clach air do charn,” he softly spoke the Gaidhlig, following it up with the English, “I will add a stone to your cairn.”

~~~~~

“What’s on yer mind?” Wake asked.

“Hmm?” she answered, being brought out of her thoughts.

“Seems like something’s troubling you.”

“I promised my parents I’d come home when it was time for my mom to have her baby. Would… would you…take over for me here? It should only be two-three weeks at the most.”

“Don’t worry, I’d be glad to. Everything’s running smooth – but it will put the tower behind schedule once again!”

“I promise to help with the tower until I have to leave, and once I get back, if that would help?”

Wake couldn’t contain his smile.

“I humbly accept the mantle of command,” Wake said as he dipped his head and shoulders in a bow.

Brianna laughed at the gesture.

“So, when’s this going to happen then?”
“I head out second week of July – the baby is due the following week, or thereabouts.”

“Och, you’ll miss the Scottish summer – I think it’s on a Tuesday this year,” Wake offered, tinge of humor obvious.

Bree’s face lit up again, and she shook her head side to side.

“Scottish weather humor?” Brianna chortled.

“Aye – if we doona have a sense of humor about it, who will?...Don’t worry, I’ll hold down the fort while ye’re gone.”
For those who have been looking forward to more Jamie and Claire, that time has come as Bree heads home for the birth of her sibling. This chapter I'm about to post and the one after it are already written, and will post on my regular schedule, but my life has turned into a crap storm which may hinder my ability to keep writing regularly. I will endeavor to keep up and maintain the quality, but there may be some delays going forward and for the foreseeable future. All I ask is that you don't abandon me while I try to find my way through this dark and scary time in my life. Writing and posting this story, and reading the comments from you is one of the few pleasures in my life, and there is so much yet to come (several hundred more pages written, but with gaps that need to be filled in - some of them almost year long leaps in the story that cannot be left). It's always a shot in the arm to come here and find I've struck a chord with someone, or just made their day by making my latest addition. Fingers crossed!!!!

“May I help ye with your bags?” Brianna heard burring behind her.

She turned quickly, fighting the urge to run to Jamie’s arms, but letting a giant smile burst upon her lips.

“Jamie... I told you I didn’t need help. Mom needs you more than I do.”

“Aye, well, your mom is fine, still working in fact, and...I wanted to make sure...looks like Scotland agrees with you, lass.”

Brianna approached Jamie, awkwardly trying to figure out how to hug him, but still maintain her composure. She fought her tears feeling his arms around her.

“The flight was...alright?” he asked in her ear.

She nodded.
“I know you doona enjoy flying – and I understand, truly, but I am glad you’ve come.”

Her cheeks were burning red, and she was sure there was a big, goofy grin on her face, and this time, now that she was in his arms, she didn’t want to let go.

“I’m glad, too,” Bree squeaked out.

~~~~

Like Jamie, the first thing I saw upon seeing my mother was her protruding belly, but as soon as she opened her arms, all I saw was my mom, and I needed to hug her like my life depended on it.

“Bree,” she almost cried in my ear.

“Whoa,” I recoiled as the baby kicked me.

“I’ve got a good kicker in there,” mom informed me, placing her hand where I had felt the impact.

I nodded in agreement, but still found myself a little shocked that I could feel a kick that sharply from a baby not yet born. I looked at my mom, making sure for myself that she was, indeed, alright. Her eyes were bright, if tired, and it was then I noticed one big change.

“Oh, my God, Mom, your hair – you cut your hair. It looks great!”

I saw Jamie’s eyes and mouth go round simultaneously.

“She did? – you did? – when?”

“While you were at the airport.”
“Why – why would ye do that?” Jamie asked, the pained sound as clear in his voice as the pained look was on his face.

“I did it because babies pull hair, and it was about time. I haven’t had a haircut, other than a trim, in over a year, and once the baby is here, I’m not going to have much personal time, am I?”

Jamie was gulping, on the verge of hyperventilating, and I watched my mother’s delighted smile fade. She stopped running her fingers over her newly shorn head and we each grabbed Jamie by an elbow and eased him into a chair.

I heard him mumbling, very lowly. It sounded like he was saying, “A piece at a time.” He didn’t explain, and mom and I were too busy trying to get him breathing regularly.

“Jamie, put your head between your knees,” my mom suggested, placing her hands on his shoulders and pressing lightly on him until he bent forward. His breathing normalized quickly, but I found myself scared. Mom has said on more than one occasion that Jamie is a haunted man, but I had never seen it so clearly for myself before. Seeing such a strong man crumble, and over a haircut…This wasn’t what I expected to come home to.

~~~~~

Mom seemed to put the incident with Jamie behind her as quickly as possible, like it was something she was used to witnessing, but to me it had been extremely disconcerting. Neither of them mentioned it during the making or eating of dinner, and I found myself afraid to say anything. I once again settled myself into the media room, which would once again serve as my bedroom while I was here. Mom and Jamie were still occupying the Leoch room until the baby came. Mom said it would become impractical once the kidlet was home – they’d move up to the bedroom that had the nearby bathroom then, though I wondered how she was getting along with the bathroom so far away during her pregnancy. I don’t know much about being pregnant, but having to pee often is part of the depiction.

I felt farther away from my parents sitting here in their home than I had the last couple of months living in Scotland. I needed something warm to drink, so I headed back up to the kitchen. Mom was just heading to bed, and we hugged as we crossed paths.

“Is Jamie still up?” I asked.
“Lingering over a cup of coffee and the day’s news,” mom replied.

“Is he…OK?” I dared to inquire, “That scene earlier…”

Mom shook her head, but more in a ‘don’t talk about it’ way than a confirmation that anything was actually wrong. Something was so up with them. I guess the true nature of how things had been going was not relayed through email, phone or skype.

I made it to the kitchen just as Jamie was folding up the last section of newspaper he was going to read. He turned as he heard me.

“Och, lass, still stalking about?”

“Time difference,” I offered as an excuse, rather than admit I felt unsettled about the atmosphere in the house. “Thought I’d have a little coffee – is there any left?”

“A few sips,” he said with a smile, “help yourself.”

He stayed at the table while I got my coffee, and smiled warmly up at me while I took my seat at the table. He reached out his hand to mine and enveloped it.

“So glad you’re here.”

It felt like he wanted to say more, but he just looked at me. But at least he looked ‘at’ me instead of ‘through’ me like the way he kept looking at mom through dinner. She’d told me about that, too, but seeing it…I know I haven’t known Jamie all that long, and we’re still getting to know each other beyond the surface, but this was not the man I left with my mother, and once I feel strong enough, I’m going to find out where he went. Jamie stayed until I finished my coffee and held me tightly before we each headed off to our beds.

“At least I’ll always have you,” he whispered in my ear as he stroked my hair.

This cryptic shit was going to have to end. Tomorrow morning Jamie and I were going to have a long talk – whether he wanted to or not.
After seeing Mom off to work, I set off to the back yard to locate Jamie. Mom said he’d been going outside and doing Yoga for the last few months, and that it had done wonders for his anxiety about her pregnancy. I spotted him sitting on the grass just beyond the bluestone wall in the lotus position. I find it amazing both my mom and dad can twist themselves like pretzels without screaming in pain. Jamie seemed perfectly poised, sitting statue still with the backs of his hands resting on his knees, palms up toward the sky in a meditative pose.

I began to walk toward him when he slumped forward and pulled his hands to cover his face. At first I feared he was physically ill, but in the short time I was frozen in my fear, I noticed the heaving of his shoulders and realized he was crying. As far as my relationship with my father had progressed in the little less than a year I had known him, this was not a situation I could have foreseen, and I gulped as I was faced with whether to leave him in his misery or take the risk of approaching him and opening myself to the possibility he would push me away. After all, I had spent a month in Scotland for every six weeks of time Jamie and I had been in the same city since I knew of his existence, and as happy as he had been to see me at the airport, the time away had created a small distance between us.

My foot made a slight tapping noise as I pivoted in indecision and Jamie drew himself back up into his contemplative pose, acting as if nothing had happened. If he was trying to protect me from seeing his true feelings, I could only imagine what he was keeping hidden from Mom.

I walked up behind him until my shadow cast him into semi-darkness.

“Mom told me you were still worried about the baby, but she doesn’t know the half of it, does she?”

My hands were on my hips as I spoke until Jamie looked up. While his eyes held no tears, a look of sheer terror met my gaze, and my hands fell to my sides. I dropped to one knee and received a crushing hug around my rib cage while I circled his neck with my arms, nudging his head down on my shoulder with my head. I could hardly breathe, he was holding onto me so tightly, but I didn’t want to do anything that would make him think I didn’t want to be in his arms right then. There were only two times before that I’d seen him so emotionally raw, and I couldn’t help responding with an emotional outburst of my own.

I tried to stifle my sob.
I was unsuccessful.

His tears burned my neck where they landed.

“I’m here mo chridhe,” I said, hoping I’d chosen the right word, and that speaking to him in Gaidhlic wouldn’t just make things worse. Jamie snorted what almost felt like a guffaw in the midst of his sobs at my attempt to soothe him, and his grip on me loosened enough to let me breathe.

“Mo Chridhe,” he repeated much better than I had been able to pronounce. “Mo nighean ruaidh,” he said in a pained tone, his sobbing subsiding. “I lose her every day. She comes back each night, but at some point, she won’t.”

It was the longest we’d ever been in physical contact, longer, even, than when he held me after I’d fallen through the tower. Our hearts seemed to be beating together, like I had been sent in as a pacemaker to capture and lower his heart rate. He brought his head up and leaned back to look at me, his arms threading up through mine to place a palm on each of my cheeks.

“You would have been enough…you and your Mam…What ‘av I done?”

“What are you talking about? You and Mom are about to have a baby – this should be one of the happiest times of your life! Why are you so worried?”

“I hafta do the worrying for the both of us – Claire doesna seem to be worrit at all.”

I shook my head in his hands.

“That’s not true at all…Mom’s worried, but she didn’t want to put any undue fears onto you. She thought you had gotten your fear under control, and she didn’t want…oh, God,” I sighed, unsure what to say or do. They’d been keeping secrets, and I would be betraying a confidence, but under the circumstances, I think…I hope Mom will understand.

“That damned British stiff upper lip,” I bitched, suddenly angry.
I disengaged from Jamie’s arms and stood, my eyes shooting daggers.

“And you,” I said pointing, “You should have told her how worried you were, but No-oo, instead of that you just refuse to engage in any appreciable way! You won’t come up with names, you won’t buy baby clothes, or diapers, or get a crib, cradle – do you have any idea how stressful that’s been for Mom?”

Jamie looked down and slowly began unfurling his legs, lifting one foot at a time with his hands until he had unlocked himself and extended his limbs in front of him.

“How can I prepare when I doona know if I am getting myself ready for one funeral or two? How am I supposed to prepare myself to lose the love of my life, knowing it’s for good this time?”

I stomped my foot.

“Fuckin’ men!”

My profanity caught him off guard.

“Mom is fine…the baby is fine. She’s a doctor…surrounded by other doctors. And this is NOT the seventeen hundreds!”

He looked at me like a puppy who’d just had his nose rubbed into the carpet he’d wrongly done his business on.

“On your feet,” I commanded. “You’re coming with me.”

The expression on Jamie’s face changed to shock, and it seemed like he wanted to say something, but instead the slightest smile flicked across his lips and he nodded.

“You, find some shoes and put them on. I’ll get the keys to the Wagoneer.”

“Where are we going?” Jamie asked. The look I gave him seemed to scare him in line, and he made
his way to the garage without a further question.

We rode in silence. I was still angry. He was barely off the edge of tears. We could have taken the train, but I wanted the chance to talk to Jamie alone if we could open the lines of communication. But first I needed to get my head clear, and driving often helped me, though getting used to the other side of the car again was making me keep my focus more than usual. I pulled into a parking space, and Jamie turned to look at me. I was still mulling things over, sitting with my hands on the steering wheel.

“You can’t ignore your feelings away,” I said, still staring ahead through the windshield. “You have to deal with them – you have to share them. I know I’m one to talk, considering what it takes for me…but…if I’ve learned anything while living in Scotland, misery shared lightens the load.”

I turned to look at my father, the slightest hint of a smile on my lips. The same look came back at me.

~~~~~

I made Jamie buy something for the baby before we went home – nothing big, just a show of faith that he believed he would meet this child of his, and that it would not cost him the child, or my mom.

~~~~~

“I’m home,” Claire called out. Brianna looked back into the house and then back at Jamie.

“Stay right here,” she once more commanded her father.

Brianna sought out her mother and brought her out onto the bluestone patio. Jamie was still seated on the stone wall, his shoulders rounded in exhaustion after the day he’d just been through, and the emotional toll it had already taken. He seemed to be concentrating his remaining strength, knowing that Bree was not about to let him off the hook until he told Claire just how much fear he’d been harboring throughout her pregnancy. Brianna steered her mother right up to Jamie, her pregnant belly staring Jamie right in the face.

“You need to tell her,” was all Brianna offered before she strode back into the house, leaving the
pair alone in the humid air of late summer.

“What’s going on?” I asked, seeing how beaten down Jamie looked.

“What’s going on?” I asked, seeing how beaten down Jamie looked.

“Has something happened? Is something going on with Bree?”

Jamie shook his head ‘no’.

“No, nothing’s wrong with the lass…it’s me…I’ve not been totally honest wi’ ye…and she’s found me out.”

“Jamie?” I asked, my head tilted.

“If ye, too, were immortal, I’d not worry so, but knowing I will someday lose you, I want that day to be as far into the future as possible.”

Jamie’s hands found mine without looking, as he was having trouble looking me in the eye, or looking at me at all.

“But this baby put that at risk, at least in my mind. I worried from the moment we knew for sure – I was sure I would lose one or both of you, that I’d be alone again, and I…I couldn’a face it. I have become increasingly haunted by thoughts of going on without you, trying not to let it show while you were around. I thought I had it under control; I thought I was dealing with it, but I was wrong.”

Jamie finally looked at me, and I could see the pain he’d been hiding in the tightness of his features.

“But this baby put that at risk, at least in my mind. I worried from the moment we knew for sure – I was sure I would lose one or both of you, that I’d be alone again, and I…I couldn’a face it. I have become increasingly haunted by thoughts of going on without you, trying not to let it show while you were around. I thought I had it under control; I thought I was dealing with it, but I was wrong.”

“Brianna showed me, made me look at my behavior…I have been so scairt. That’s why I couldn’a bring myself to talk about names for this one, or buy anything for this bairn.”

His hands brought my hands to my belly, and he let them go so he could curve his hands around my
roundness, do his best to hold a baby that was not yet born.

“We made such plans the first time. I got my hopes so high. And then the joy of knowing we had made another child, only for it to be on the eve of when I was supposed to die...when we make children, it brings misery, and despite my best efforts, and the joy it should have brought this time, watching you grow great with child merely set me on a path of dark imaginings.”

~~~~~

Jamie was completely drained after confessing his fears. He didn't even want to eat. I took him down to the Leoch room and put him to bed. I sat with his head in what was left of my lap and stroked my fingers through his hair until he managed to fall asleep. All the excitement had the baby wide awake, and I was being kicked with great force. I put Jamie’s hand where the kicks felt the strongest, and hoped he could feel it even as he slept.

Watching Jamie sleep was soothing for me as well. Everything had been in a holding pattern - I’d stopped trying to get Jamie to prepare, taking over what should have been joint decisions and making them for the both of us. And not being able to share it all with Jamie – it brought back my pregnancy with Brianna. Jamie was only there for me in spirit with Brianna, and while he was physically here with me throughout this pregnancy, I had hoped...I had wanted more.

Jamie looked peaceful, perhaps for the first time in months. I know I should have confronted him sooner, but I truly hoped the meditation was working to the degree Jamie led me to believe. I don’t know what Bree said to him, but I’ll have to thank her for opening this door into Jamie’s soul.

~~~~~

It was late, the wee hours, when Jamie woke. He looked at me bright eyed and unburdened, placing his ear to my belly.

“She’s doin’ the sword dance,” Jamie quipped.

“He’s been doing that for hours,” I replied, “And mostly on my bladder.”

“Are ye hungry?” Jamie inquired.
“Very – I’m sure Bree left us something.”

“Aye, and if not, I’ll scrounge up something,” he assured me as he arched his back and seemed to float, hovering just above the covers.

“You wait, I’ll deliver,” Jamie purred seductively.

“Um, I think not,” I said, giving him a look of urgency, scrambling from the bed myself. I turned and looked back at him with a smile as we heard the TV in the media room, reminding us that Brianna was here. I headed up to the bathroom as Jamie headed to the kitchen.

By the time I joined him, he’d already set out a selection of nibbles and had two place settings laid out. Bree must have smelled the coffee Jamie reheated for me, for she appeared moments after he placed the cup in front of me.

“Are you supposed to drink coffee, Mom?”

“In moderation – everything is allowable in moderation,” I droned, defiantly taking a sip.

“Okay, okay – touchy much?...So does this late night coffee klatch mean…” She smiled a toothy grin and was caught off guard when Jamie wrapped her in his arms.

“Oh, hello,” she reacted, “Is…everything…out in the open?”

“Aye, lass, thanks to you,” he whispered in her ear, his appreciation evident in his tone.

“Come, give me a hug too,” I implored raising my arms up to her.

“I don’t know what you did or said, but it did the trick.” I exhaled heavily, but refused to let go of Brianna for the longest few seconds.
The change in Jamie over the last couple of days has been remarkable. I know he’s still worried, but since it’s been out in the open he’s been quite responsive to my wants and needs. Despite the much more relaxed atmosphere, the baby still refuses to make its debut. I’m well past my due date, but I feel content, like I’ve been given time to finish my nesting, and time for Jamie to join me in our nest.

I expected to find Brianna with Jamie in the media room, but found just my husband. He was calming himself, surrounded by all of Bree’s things. Her being here has been remarkable medicine for him.

“No Brianna?” I asked as I toddled down the ramp.

“She’s meeting up with someone for dinner,” he replied as he stood and reached out for my hand, “so it’s just us for now.”

His eyes sparkled when he relayed that information to me, and he settled me into the chez lounge end of the seating pit.

“Oh, it’s good to be off my feet,” I sighed, and I could see the wheels turning in Jamie’s head. He reached out for my left foot, holding it up with one hand as he began to untie my shoe.

“I’ll help ye with your laces,” he said with a smirk, giving my foot a good rub as he removed the shoe from it.

“Somehow, I remember those words seeming far more romantic and suggestive than just leading to my feet being naked.”

“Just you wait, Sassenach,” he purred in the utmost seductive tone.

He sat at my feet, massaging each one until I was nearly unconscious from the delightful sensations.
I felt Jamie shift, reaching for something.

“What are you doing?” I sleepily mumbled, not wanting him to stop.

“I’m cuttin’ your toe nails before ye lacerate anything important, Sassenach. These last few weeks it’s been like sleepin’ with a large talon-ed bird with restless leg syndrome, but I’d been afraid to say anything.”

I was pleasantly drowsy, fortunately for Jamie.

“It’s not like I could reach anymore, Jamie,” I acknowledged.

His touch was so delicate, and so delightful, I found myself longing for his hands to explore me, and his mouth, and his tongue. Jamie must have read my face. His hands slid up each of my legs. A tingling sensation washed over my body. Although we’d continued to have sex throughout my pregnancy, there had been a disconnect. Jamie had been physically present in every way, but I had lost that sense of intimacy, the emotional bond had been missing. As I felt his hands move higher and higher, I was in heaven. Even fully pregnant, Jamie could twist me into positions to tantalize my desires.

“You’re sure Bree’s not coming back for a while?” I breathlessly asked before reaching for the button on Jamie’s jeans.

“Aye, we have time,” Jamie assured me.

Without fear to harness Jamie’s emotions, we rediscovered each other on the deepest levels. Finally contented after months of angst and anxiety, any disconnect faded from my thoughts.

~~~~~~

Bree and Jamie’s tradition of movie night resumed as the days passed without Claire going into labor, and them having days to fill while they waited.

“I’ve got a cunning plan,” Brianna announced as she bounded down into the seating pit, holding a
DVD case aloft. “I thought it was about time we actually watched this.”

Bree handed over the case in her hand to Jamie.

“Black Adder?” Jamie questioned.

“You remember it?” Bree asked, the smile taking over her face.

“Aye – Griff got me to watch it after…when I stayed with Andrew in the eighties. The first series, anyway.”

Bree came to understand he was talking about the aftermath of one of his resurrections, and they shared a moment.

“Would you rather watch something else?” Brianna offered.

“No, it’s perfect – fresh horses and all.”

Bree giggled, remembering how they had both yelled that out when Brian Blessed had first graced the screen in Flash Gordon. After setting the disk in the tray, Bree settled back on the couch and nestled up against Jamie’s side. He put his arm around her, and she put her head on his shoulder, exhauling with a slight sound.

“I’ve missed this,” she said, reaching her hand over and patting Jamie’s chest over his heart. His hand pressed hers even tighter to his chest and he nodded, holding back his tears.

Their emotions settled as they watched, letting humor lighten their hearts. At a few points, Bree blushed bright red, the suggestive nature of one of the jokes hitting her. She’d forgotten those moments, and found herself slightly embarrassed to be snuggled up to her father’s side while they played out, but as Jamie laughed at them, Brianna let go of her apprehension, and just laughed herself. The first series was as far as they got in one sitting. As entertaining as it was, neither could keep their eyes open any longer if they were to continue watching.

“So,” Jamie began, “how’s living at Lallybroch?”
“A little Spartan, but I’m growing fond of it. The outbuildings came together so nicely, and the tower is coming along. There’s still a lot of cosmetic work to do on the house – we need to restore the Laird’s room and the North room yet – they took the brunt of the moisture damage, but…it’s going well. I was so scared going into this, but I’m glad I did it.”

“Good for you, lass. No trouble, then?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. One of the workers was rather vocal about working for a woman, but I told him he could leave if he didn’t want the job.”

Jamie smiled proudly.

“Put him in his place?”

“I did,” Bree beamed back, turning on the couch and pulling her knee up sideways as she was now turned toward Jamie.

“Moisture damage?” he asked, referring to her earlier words.

“Yeah, Wake got to the leak early enough, but some damage had been done. They had to take some of the walls back to the framing I’m afraid. The Laird’s room – was it largely blue?”

“Aye,” he nodded.

“I thought so – do you want it to look like it did? I remember you said you didn’t want to make the Leoch room in shades of blue and green because it would make you feel like you were on a boat.”

“Aye, I did. Again, I trust yer judgment. She’s your house, too. Maybe more so yours than mine now, as , if you say, many of the walls I remember are gone – if walls could talk, aye?”

“Oh,” Bree exclaimed, remembering something. She slid down the couch to her backpack and rummaged through a few things, bringing out a tee shirt in which something was wrapped.
“Wake found this while he was stripping back one of the walls. He thought maybe it was something you’d want.”

Bree unwrapped the item and held it out to Jamie. His eyes lit up.

“Sawny,” he said, taking the carved wooden snake into his grasp. “I havna seen him since young Ian was a bairn. My brother Willie carved him for me.”

“What does ‘Sawny’ mean?”

“It’s short for Alexander – my second name. My brother called me that. I carved one just like him for my William. Sawny - a survivor, that one.”

Jamie shook his head side to side, remembering how that snake had passed through the hands of most of the people he had ever loved.

“Sawny.”

He pulled Bree in tight and kissed her on the cheek.

“You’ve lightened my heart yet again.”
I hope the wait has been worth it. I know it's taken more than nine months to get here, but at long last, we're having a baby...

Claire stood at the nurse’s station reviewing the chart she needed. The walk from her office had felt like an arduous journey, but she leaned against the counter for support, one hand rubbing her lower back. She put the file down and bent forward, both hands on the edge of the counter, working the kinks out of her shoulders, and then stood back up to continue looking over the chart, and rub her back in that spot again.

From up the hall, Dr. MacInnes observed Dr. Fraser’s posture and behavior. She smiled, and approached Claire.

“Didn’t you go on leave two weeks ago?” Janet asked as Claire noticed her.

“Officially, yes, but this baby just is not ready to come out, it seems, so I’m getting some paperwork done and making sure everything is in order.”

“This baby may be more ready than you think…I noticed you rubbing your back…”

“These floors – I never noticed it at my normal weight, but between the unforgiving floors, and this one twisting my spine out of shape,” Claire explained, hand traveling to her almost protruding belly button, “I’ve had a bit of a strained muscle.”

“I don’t think that’s what’s happening, Claire. You’ve heard of back labor?”

Claire tilted her head.

“Well, of course, but…”
“I think we better take a look,” Janet asserted. “How long have you been having the pain in your back?”

“Since three mornings ago, but there’ve been no other signs…” Claire explained as Dr. MacInnes held Claire by the elbow to make her walk along with her to the exam room.

“Have you and Jamie…done anything that could have triggered labor?”

“Yes,” Claire said with an incredulous shake of her head. “I’m well past my due date – I figured to be well into sleepless nights and three AM feedings by now. That’s part of why I’m still coming to work – I cannot simply sit around watching Jamie worry. I only just found out how…scared he is, that something will go wrong. Janet, he’s gotten me worried, and the later this baby is…”

“Fear is self-fulfilling. I would have told you if there was anything wrong – you know that.”

“I know…I do know that…but I told you, Jamie and I lost our first baby, and he’s gone to that place of sorrow.”

“And you can’t blame him for that, nor would I find it unusual for you either. That loss never disappears, Claire, but those were different circumstances. At least Jamie told you how he’s feeling.”

“Only because Brianna made him – I don’t know exactly what she said or did, but the day after she got home, suddenly she leads me onto the patio, and I get a teary confession of his held back fears. It was quite cathartic for him, and actually, it allowed me to relax, knowing I needn’t walk on eggshells.”

Claire sucked in a breath and held her hand to her back once more. They had arrived at the exam room. Dr. MacInnes helped Claire onto the bed and began her cursory exam.

“You are definitely in labor – early stages yet, but I’m not letting you go home.”

“My phone is in my office, and I’d rather not call home from an unknown number.”
“I’ll have it brought to you.”

Janet’s look was stern, and Claire resignedly nodded.

~~~~~~

A young candy-striper came into the room.

“Dr. Fraser?” she asked, almost fearfully.

“Yes,” I replied.

She held out my phone at arm’s length until I took it from her.

“I’m not going to bite,” I told the young lady.

“No, ma’am.”

She glanced uneasily several times at the foot of the bed.

“The baby is not about to come shooting out. You can relax.”

“Um…yes ma’am”

“Please, stop calling me ma’am – it makes me feel incredibly old. I’m Claire,” I informed her, reaching out my hand to shake hers.

Her eyes welled up with tears and she dashed off, never to be seen again, but she had brought me my phone. I realized that if I were to call Jamie it would likely set him off, so I called the only
person I could.

“Hello, Brianna?”

“Hey, Mom, how’s the paperwork coming along?”

“Fine…Um, Bree…are you at the house with Jamie, by any chance?”

“Um, yeah. Did you hit my number by mistake?”

“No, you are definitely the one I meant to call. I need you to stay calm, and if Jamie is listening, just keep smiling and don’t say anything to him until you get off the phone – I’ve gone into labor.”

Brianna got up from the kitchen table, keeping a pleasant expression on her face, and held her finger up to keep Jamie from interrupting or asking questions while she tried to concentrate.

“Oh, OK. I completely understand. I’ll grab the jeep and we’ll meet you there.”

“Thank you for keeping a level head.”

“I got that from you,” Brianna complimented.

~~~~

Bree hung up and tucked her phone into her pocket before she turned to face Jamie.

“OK, I need you to stay calm.”

Jamie’s eyes immediately went wide and he slowly rose to his feet.
Jamie nodded as he tried to take slow, deep breaths.

“She’ll need her ‘go’ bag,” Jamie choked out between cleansing breaths.

“You get that, I’ll go start the Wagoneer – I’m driving, no arguments.”

“You’ll get none.”

Their lunch dishes still cluttered the table, but it would have to be.

Jamie just folded into the passenger seat, Claire’s ‘go bag’ clutched in his grip.

“Everything’s going to be OK,” Brianna reassured her father, the familiar phrase breaking through Jamie’s worry to put a slight smile on his lips.

Jamie nodded and released a deep breath. Bree reached out for his hand, holding it while the vehicle idled, still in park. They nodded reassuringly at each other, Bree finally taking her other hand back and putting them both on the steering wheel. She’d been driving on the other side of the road and the car for the last couple of months and wanted to have a tight grip on things for their trip to the hospital.

“The traffic shouldn’t be too bad this time of day, so we’ll be there pretty soon,” Brianna told her father in one more effort to calm him before she pulled onto the road.

Neither of them remembered much about the trip to the hospital, but they arrived safely. Jamie was still quite scared something would go wrong, but Brianna gave him strength just by being by his side. They held hands as they rode up in the elevator, Bree feeling like a role reversal had taken place, and she was somehow mothering her own father. She smiled, suddenly understanding how a person could be brave sometimes, and scared at other times and it wasn’t a contradiction. They walked along the hall quickly to Claire’s room, Jamie beginning to regain his strength with each
step. He had almost reached a point of hopeful thoughts when they reached the room, and it was… empty.

Jamie gulped hard and fell to his knees, sure the empty bed meant he had lost Claire. He reflexively crossed himself. Bree exhaled heavily, knowing where his mind had gone, but also knowing he had to be wrong. When the elevator doors pinged, Bree turned to see her mother step off holding a tray from the cafeteria.

“Mom!” she called out, glaring. Bree stood staring until Claire was close.

“You can’t tell us you’re going to be waiting and then not be there,” Brianna admonished, stepping aside to let her see Jamie down on his knees.

Claire handed her tray over to Bree and put her hand on Jamie’s head.

“Love, I’m here. I’m not leaving you…”

Jamie looked up and let out a pained breath.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t waiting here for you. The pain is easier to manage if I keep moving right now. I walked in circles in this hall at first, but I knew Janet would eventually confine me to my room. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here for you to find.”

Claire reached down to cradle Jamie’s face and he rose to his feet, so glad to feel that she was real, so relieved, that he couldn’t hold back his tears. Claire winced through a contraction as she stood holding Jamie, knowing his pain was probably worse right now.

“Walked all the way to the cafeteria?” Brianna commented, flashing an obvious glance at what was on her tray.

“It could be hours yet,” Claire replied.

“Walk with me, Jamie. It’ll make us both feel better,” Claire predicted, getting Jamie to put a supportive arm around her back and start moving slowly.
“Be back,” she mouthed to Brianna as they slipped past her into the hall.

Bree rolled her eyes into her head for a moment, unbelieving the scene she just experienced.

“Not your best move, mom.”

~~~~~

Bree made herself at home in her mother’s room while she waited for Jamie and Claire to return. She pulled the covers on the bed closed and sat on top, crossing her feet at the ankle and propping the head end of the bed up so she could watch the TV. She fielded room intrusions from several nurses, all of whom were perturbed not to find Claire in her bed, and one of whom gave Brianna a withering look until she was roused to respond.

“You can stare all you like, but my mom’s the one having the baby, not me.”

“Dr. MacInnes wants an update, she’s in delivery with another patient,” the nurse informed Bree.

“She’s out there, walking around with my father. You’ll have to catch her to check her.” Bree smirked enigmatically, and then remembered her mother’s rule number one in hospital etiquette – don’t get on the bad side of the nurses. She uncrossed her ankles and sat up.

“Sorry – they’re both really nervous, and cooping them up in here before it’s completely necessary…you’d have a complete meltdown on your hands – and that’s just my father.”

The nurse nodded.

“I’m pretty sure my mom knows when it’s time to stop roaming the halls – and right now I wouldn’t be surprised to find her doing jumping jacks – she’s almost two weeks overdue.”

~~~~~

Jamie and my mom walked the halls together for quite some time, and I think it was time well
spent. When they finally came back into the room, both looked composed and prepared.

“Ready to lay down now?” I asked.

“Not really,” my mom replied, “but my water broke. I wish I could walk around until the last moment.”

Jamie was quiet, but helped mom into her bed and rubbed her back whenever she began to wince. It was turning into a surreal experience. I was there, but it was beginning to feel like I was removed from reality, as if watching through a camera lens. I could feel the power of my parents love for each other. Suddenly, I felt this wave of fear, and I think I got a hint of what Jamie had been going through during this pregnancy. I think I went numb after that. Everything was a blur until they started wheeling mom out of the room.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, looked up into Jamie’s face, and automatically stood, knowing it was time.

~~~~~~

They wheeled Claire quickly toward the delivery room, Jamie keeping pace at one side and Brianna stepping lively at the foot of the bed. The automatic doors opened ahead of them, but Brianna hesitated at the threshold, like an unseen force field had come up to block her path. Jamie noticed her being left behind, squeezed Claire’s hand, pecked her on the cheek and said, “I’ll be but a minute – wait for me!”

Claire leaned half up and called, “That’s not up to me!” at his retreating back.

Brianna stood paralyzed, looking at the sign over her head that said ‘delivery’.

“You OK, lass?” Jamie asked.

“I don’t think I can go in there,” she told him. Jamie nodded at her, not in agreement, but in understanding.
“I can handle it on my own,” he declared, as if he was about to deliver the baby, “But your mam would like it if ye could be there, too. She’s said as much. I can hold your hand, as well as Claire’s, need be.”

For the first time, Brianna’s eyes moved from the sign, and looked into Jamie’s eyes. They were two sides of the mirror – fear and excitement painted the same expression on both faces. Bree reached her hand out to Jamie, and they walked swiftly up the hall Claire had been wheeled along.

The controlled chaos of child delivery swirled around the pair of them until Claire extended both hands, soon acquiring a husband on one hand and a daughter on the other. Claire’s smile at their arrival was short-lived as a strong contraction reminded her of the business at hand.

“I don’t remember it being so painful,” Brianna blurted, seeing the pain in her mother’s eyes.

“That’s because the last time it was you clawing your way to freedom,” Claire reminded her. “You didn’t see it from this side.”

Claire let out a squeal of pain.

“I’m sorry,” Brianna contritely mouthed.

Claire looked first at Jamie, who was holding down a smile, then to her daughter.

“I forgave you the moment I held you,” she told Brianna.

The quiet moment was interrupted by the next contraction. Claire lurched forward and squeezed both hands in her grasp. Jamie placed his hand on Claire’s back only to find Brianna’s hand already there. Claire could feel them staring at each other behind her back, and could see Jamie nod his head out of the corner of her eyes. It was a moment she had been hoping for. Jamie was no longer just her mother’s husband, or her long absent father, or Jamie, he just became ‘Dad’, a title that would soon be in effect two times over.
I had never forgotten the pain of childbirth, even twenty years later, and while it was physically very similar, the fact that I had not only Jamie, but Brianna too, with me made the experience far less harrowing. Fiona had been with me for Brianna’s birth, mostly because none of the nurses could pry my hand off of hers, and as much as I appreciated her presence, it didn’t compare to having my husband and Bree to see me through, even if both of them were more scared than I was.

Jamie’s pulse was thrumming as my contractions were down to one minute apart. He was an emotional raw knuckle, still very much worried he would lose us both, but something about having Brianna in the room kept the worst of his fears in check. My ‘active labor’ was progressing rather rapidly, and I was glad to finally have things underway.

“Where the hell is she?” I yelled, wondering why I was not looking into the face of Janet MacInnes.

“Claire, I could hear you from the elevator!” my doctor told me as she came into the room and took up her place. “Looks like everyone is here. Brianna, lovely to see you.”

“Hi, Dr. MacInnes.”

“How’s Scotland been?”

“Amazing.”

“Good…now, looks like this baby is finally ready.”

~~~~~

Claire was nearly bent in half, her legs so braced her knees were in her armpits. Jamie and Brianna each had a hold of one of her knees, much more involved than either thought they would be, but Jamie would not have missed a second of this birth. He’d never actually been part of a birth – it wasn’t something men got involved in back in the days when Jenny was having her bairns, and from that time on, the children in Jamie’s life were rather fully formed when they came to him, or they never came. Jamie was providing Claire with physical support, and she was providing him with emotional support, trying to smile through her pain, reassure Jamie that this was all normal.

“The head is crowning. You’ve got it now, Claire,” Dr.MacInnes told the mom to be.
Claire puffed, and first tightened her grip on Jamie’s hand, then Brianna’s. She could no longer keep her façade for Jamie’s benefit as she strained to let the baby’s head pass out of her.

“That’s it, Claire, the head is born,” Janet told her, letting Claire exhale for a moment, “Take a few breaths, and then we’ll get this baby completely born.”

Claire nodded at her doctor and then looked into Jamie’s eyes, trying to smile, but her face looking pained as she started the next push and cried out in effort. The volume of her cry lessened, but it lingered for quite a long time until Claire ran short on breath.

“You’re baby is born,” Dr. MacInnes declared, slowly rolling the little body over in her arms, turning the child right side up, “And, it’s a boy.”

“A boy?” Jamie exclaimed.

“A boy?” Claire exhaled.

Bree’s eyes grew large, seeing very clearly that it was a boy.

“Are ye sure?” Jamie questioned.

“I’ve delivered plenty of both. Trust me, this is a boy,” Janet reassured the nervous father as she placed the still slimy infant on Claire’s chest while the placenta continued to pump the rest of the baby’s blood into his body.

“He’s perfect,” Claire cried, counting fingers and toes, and all relevant appendages. Bree stepped aside as several nurses approached with cloths to take much of the miasma from the boy’s skin, doing a preliminary cleaning.

That done, the doctor stepped forward to check the heart rate, breathing, muscle tone, reflex response and color.

“If you’re talking Apgar score, Claire, you are right on track – perfect tens across the board.”
Claire was already taken by her newly born son, smiling at him even as she cried. Jamie was still in shock, so sure he’d never see the day the he and Claire would produce a boy. He couldn’t even talk, just let the tears run down his cheeks.

After a few minutes, Janet rechecked the baby’s vitals, reconfirming the perfect Apgar.

“Once the placenta is done pulsing, would Dad like to cut the cord?”

“Yeah, Dad, you should,” Brianna advised, calling Jamie ‘dad’ for the first time. He smiled across his wife and new child to look at his daughter with an unknown pride.

“Dad?” he asked, wanting to make sure he had heard her correctly.


“Here you go,” Dr. MacInnes said, handing the scissors to Jamie, handles first. She pointed to the space between the two clamps, inches from the baby.

“So close?” he questioned.

“Exactly where it should be.”

“I trust you, Jamie,” Claire confidently spoke. Jamie’s hand shook a bit, but he did the job, cleaved the child from his mother.

“Time of birth – 5:01 PM on August 1, 2016. He’s officially his own person,” the doctor relayed. “Alright, let’s get him completely cleaned up, and record those vital statistics,” the doctor said as she slowly took him from Claire’s arms.

Jamie fussed, fearing the child was being taken away.
“Go with him,” Claire encouraged, “You keep an eye on him, and Bree will keep an eye on me.”

Jamie numbly nodded, following the few steps to where the boy would be cleaned up, weighed and measured. He didn’t take his eyes off the boy once, taking no chance.

“Seven pounds, four ounces.”

“Is that a good size?” Jamie asked.

“Very good,” Janet replied, “And twenty-two and a half inches long – also very good. Would you like to hold him now?”

Jamie extended his hands tentatively, one hand cupping the baby’s head as his arm slid up the length of the child’s spine until he felt he was stably supporting his son. He drew the boy in close to his chest, releasing a pained breath, taking in another.


While Jamie stood enthralled at the feeling of his son in his arms, Claire endeavored to deliver the placenta as quietly as she could, not wanting to draw Jamie’s attention from his son. But he heard her struggle, and came to be by her side. Claire nodded, letting Jamie know this, too, was normal for a birth. It was an education for Jamie, and for Brianna. Bree actually looked a little pale.

~~~~~

Jamie didn’t take his eyes off his new son from the moment he was placed in his arms until they were all back in Claire’s room. He refused to be in a different room than Claire as well, needing the constant reassurance that both of them would be alright. Claire was settled, albeit uncomfortably, but that was unavoidable so soon after giving birth. And though it had been an ordeal, Claire wasn’t really tired. Waiting for this baby to arrive had been tiring, but actually giving birth had been exhilarating.

“Jamie, bring him to me?” Claire asked, arms reaching out.
Jamie looked up from the boy, the smile on his face so far beyond joy. It was hard to let go, but Jamie settled their son into Claire’s arms and watched as she unwrapped him, and once more took inventory, assuring nothing was missing.

“Is something wrong?” Bree tentatively broached, not wanting to scare Jamie, but seeing how her mother was looking over the boy’s body.

“I just want to take him all in,” Claire exuded.

Bree suddenly smiled.

“Oh my God, Mom, he’s got the Fraser feet – you better hold on to him the first time you give him a bath or he might paddle away!”

Jamie chortled, but soon had tears streaming down his face – happy tears, thankfully.
Mom finally succumbed to the exhaustion of giving birth, and Jamie – Dad - wasn’t about to let their new baby out of his sight, or his arms. He was settled in the lounging chair next to Mom’s bed with the new little boy slung across his chest. He was taking long, deep breaths, almost as if he was finally convinced he wasn’t going to lose either of them. He fretted the entire length of Mom’s pregnancy – the entire length of their marriage so far, but now, with a child on his chest and my Mom only as far as his outstretched hand, he was calm.

And I…I was the spare wheel. I could have had another lounging chair brought in for my use, and stayed with them, but I didn’t really belong. They needed to bond, and I needed a real night’s sleep. I touched my Dad on his free arm. He smiled in a way I’d never seen before.

“Dad, I’m gonna go home for the night. Will you tell Mom I’ll be back in the morning if she wakes while I’m gone?”

His free hand clasped mine before I moved away.

“Stay?”

I shook my head.

“You’re good – the room’s not big enough for me anyway. I love you…Dad.”

There it was again, that smile.

“Have Mom call me if there’s anything I need to bring back with me…enjoy your son.”

Tears filled the corners of his eyes and he looked down at the boy. He nodded back up at me. He reached out to touch Mom’s hand, make sure it was warm, I’m sure, and then he nodded at me again, bidding adieu without disturbing the little bundle on his chest.
It was almost midnight when I exited the hospital parking garage. All the neons were out, and Boston took on its glow. I think a weather system must have passed through while we were in the hospital, because it was degrees cooler, and it wasn’t just the night air. The trip home was far less stressful than the drive in had been. After waiting so long for Mom to give birth, it was a relief that the baby was here, and I started thinking about getting back to Scotland, back to Lallybroch. It was already past the time I’d told Wake I’d be coming back and we’d only traded a few emails.

I pulled up in front of the house around one AM, and hoped I’d finally figured out the time difference. Fiona should be up by now – well into breakfast preparations, so after grabbing a quick drink, I called her.

“Bree Dear?”

“Hi Fee – we finally have baby – a boy!”

“Och, and your Da was so sure it’d be another girl. Everyone’s healthy?”

“Mom and the baby are perfect…Dad’s getting there.”

“He’s Dad now, is he?”

“Yeah, he is.”

“Good for you – oh, hold on – Roger, Claire had the baby – a boy no less,” continued in a slightly muffled tone.

“Does that mean Brianna’s comin’ back soon?” sounded in the background, and by now Bree had learned the differences between Roger’s and Wake’s voices, and knew instantly she was hearing Wake.

“I’ll ask,” Fiona’s voice picked up. “Bree? Will you be headed back here any time soon?”
“Soon as I can. I know I was supposed to back already, and it probably won’t be much longer, but I want to make sure they get settled in – there’s been some…drama leading up to the birth – not medical, and I’ll tell you all about it once I get back. I’m sure it’ll all go smoothly, and I’ll be back there before you know it.”

“Get some rest, now, so you can help your mother with a clear head, alright, dear?”

“That’s why I came home tonight instead of staying in the room with them.”

“I’ll let you go then.”

“Nighty-night, Wren,” Roger called out just before the line dropped out.

I laughed as I put the phone away and headed down to the media room for the night. It was strange being in the house all alone again. The last time I was here alone, I accidentally fell asleep watching The Princess Bride DVD. This time, I intended to fall asleep, and hoped I’d be able after the excitement of the day.

~~~~~

Brianna settled into her blanket on the sectional couch and was soon drifting off, pillow clutched in her arms. A pleasant smile came up on her lips as she began to dream. Intense green eyes were staring into hers, and she could hear Wake’s voice repeatedly saying “Brianna.” She could even feel his breath brushing close to the back of her neck, and all it took was hearing his voice in the background of a phone call. How could his voice alone be so powerful? She hadn’t been thinking about him since she got to Boston except when his emails would come through, but right now, he was touching off fires in her soul.

The dream image of Wake moved in to kiss her, and it was everything a dream kiss could be. It wasn’t just lips touching lips, it was a full contact kiss, and her entire body reacted. Bree moaned and made other mewings of pleasure as she dreamed of his hands slowly undressing her. She was sinking to her back, not wanting him to stop. She called out, “yes”.

Bree woke with a start, sitting bolt upright. As soon as she could think, she looked for a clock, wondering how long she had been trapped in a dream world with Wake. It had only been fifteen minutes. She was thankful no one else was in the house, unsure if the sounds she had been uttering in her dreams had actually been vocalized, and knowing if they had been, she’d have no explanation for them other than the obvious.
“Maybe I was a bit hasty about heading back to Scotland – Mom’s gonna need me around for a while,” she tried to convince herself.

Bree tentatively laid her head back down, looking around for the ghosts of thoughts of Wake, sure they would show themselves again once she closed her eyes.

~~~~~

Bree did sleep, but she woke more exhausted, Wake having been in her mind all through the night. By the time she’d ingested her coffee, she was sure she shouldn’t throw herself into the lion’s den, and that she would stay in Boston as long as she could get away with being away from Lallybroch – her parents needed her, the convenient excuse.

~~~~~

Despite her lack of restorative sleep, Brianna got ready for the day and made herself a breakfast. She cleared the dishes that she and Jamie had left the previous day, and did some general tidying – the little tasks she’d been watching Jamie do each day since she’d been home. There’d been no messages left, but Bree didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. She decided to go with no news is good news as her mantra for the morning, and she headed to the garage.

It was just after 10:30 in the morning when she arrived at her mother’s door. Jamie saw her the moment she arrived and instantly launched a request at her.

“Would you please talk some sense into her?”

Bree looked at her mother. She had the baby in her arms and at her breast, and she didn’t look the least perturbed, but Jamie looked exasperated.

“What’s happening?”

“Young Mam wants to go home – now! Tell her it’s a bad idea! Tell her we canna do anything of the sort.”

“Mom?” Bree questioned.
“There have been no complications. The baby is thriving – I swear he’s already put on a pound, and I don’t see any reason for me to stay here. I’m not sick; I’m not injured. I had a baby, not a heart transplant.”

Her voice was controlled, and with each word she said, Jamie clung tighter to his head, like it might explode if he let go.

“Dad, it’s not unusual for mothers to go home the day after the birth.”

Jamie gulped, seeing that rather than backing him up, he was now outnumbered. He sat on the lounge chair and took a few deep breaths.

“I’m assuming Dr. MacInnes has signed off on this?” Brianna asked her mother.

“Not yet – but - ”

“Stop right there,” Bree interrupted. “Why don’t we have her evaluate the situation? Would that be acceptable to both of you?”

Claire looked at Bree and lowered her head in a barely there nod.

“Dad?”

He closed his eyes and nodded.

“Acceptable.”

~~~~~

“Dr. MacInnes will be in to see you as soon as she’s free. She’s in delivery right now,” the nurse informed Claire. “He’s beautiful,” she commented, “looks just like his mama.”
“See, Mom, you finally got that baby with your delicate features – poor boy – I was an absolute brute,” she said, turning toward Jamie to tell him. Jamie came over and hugged Brianna.

“Not a brute, just healthy and strong. I can only pray he has your constitution.”

“I’m sure he will,” she soothed, knowing her father was still tied in knots even though everything seemed to be fine.

Claire wanting to head home had reignited his fears, remembering how all had seemed fine after Willie was born, only for tragedy to strike, rendering his only previous son motherless only hours after his birth. That feeling had never left him – the guilt that he had contributed to the young woman’s death even if he had had no choice in what came about.

~~~~~

It was at least another hour before Janet arrived, having only been told that the Frasers needed to see her. Claire was still holding the baby, but he’d long since sucked his fill, and had drifted to sleep in Claire’s arms.

“Is everything alright?” she said as she strode into the room and took up Claire’s chart.

“It’s fine,” Claire began, “and that’s why I’d like to go home with my baby.”

“Oh, I see,” she said toward Claire.

As she turned her head toward Jamie she said, “I understand why you’re nervous, but there’s really no need. Baby is hale and hearty, and mother is doing very well.”

“Can you check on that?” Jamie asked.

“What my Dad means is, they’re putting this in your hands. If you give Mom the all-clear, he’ll let her leave the hospital.”
“I don’t know whether to be honored or not,” Dr. MacInnes replied.

“Would you mind stepping out while I do the exam?” Janet politely requested.

Bree took Jamie by the arm and pulled him out into the hall, waiting for the door to close before she began to speak.

“There’s one thing that will throw a spanner into the works of Mom’s plan – you guys didn’t buy anything for the baby. You have to have a car seat, and clothes, and diapers – I’m not sure she’s thought of that.”

A smile blossomed on Jamie’s face, Brianna shining a ray of light upon him.

“Aye.”

~~~~~

“You can come back in now,” Janet announced as she reopened the door to Claire’s room.

“Everything checks out,” the doctor said with a smile, “Claire can go home, but you stay out of there,” Janet warned, a look in her eyes telling Jamie exactly what she meant, but she clarified as well, “No sex until after the six week check-up.”

Jamie grinned sheepishly. He let out a deep breath, glad that Claire was deemed medically ready, but also reveling in the information Bree had given him in the hall – there was no way she was prepared to get the baby to or have the baby at home without a major shopping spree. Jamie leaned in close to give Claire a quick kiss and take the baby into his arms. His face lit up as he bounced the baby slightly, thinking he had dodged the first of a million bullets. He was happily keeping the baby entertained, almost self-absorbed in a world where only the baby existed.

“Mom? Do you need me to do some shopping – stuff for the baby?”
“That won’t be necessary,” Claire calmly replied, pleasant smile filling her face.

“But…you’ll at least need a car seat – “

“I’ve got one.” Brianna’s eyebrows furrowed, and then one lifted above the other.

“Bring me my bag,” Claire requested.

The bag in hand, Claire dug out her office keys and handed them to Bree.

“Go to my office, the closet, and the lower drawers in my desk will have everything we need.”

Bree stood stunned for a moment, and then looked at her father who was just getting wind of what Claire was saying. Bree and Jamie gave each other a pained look, Bree’s an apology, Jamie’s heartsick.

~~~~~

As Bree walked swiftly from her mother’s room in the maternity ward to her office, she became a bit nervous. She didn’t doubt that her mother would be fine going home, but she worried for Jamie. It just further cemented the idea in her head that she should be in no hurry to return to Scotland. As she entered her mother’s office, there was nothing on the surface to say she’d been shopping for the impending arrival, but a quick opening of the closet door almost started an avalanche. The closet usually contained one lonely rain coat and an umbrella. They were pushed hard to one side, as the rest of the closet was filled floor to ceiling with baby items.

“My mom opened her own Babies ‘R’ Us store,” Brianna muttered as she scanned the over-stuffed space.

A car seat, a diaper genie, giant packs of three different sizes of diapers, a breast pump, a baby bathtub, dozens of bags of clothing and bedding – you name it, it was packed in there. Some of the items had been arranged fancifully, and Bree surmised there must have been a baby shower thrown for her mother here at the hospital. In the lower desk drawers was more of the same – the overflow from the closet and assorted toiletries, lotions and potions, teethers – a whole pharmacy shoved in three drawers. And on top of it all, an inflated donut to make sitting less onerous.
Brianna sat in her mother’s desk chair and swung it back and forth as she absorbed just what her mother had been up to in the months she was away – and maybe even before that due to the sheer volume of items she had collected. Bree gave a little extra oomph as she set the chair spinning back the other way, and it carried in a full circle, Bree bringing both feet down hard to stop the chair as it reached the forward position.

“You might get your way after all, Dad. It will take two days to load this all in the Wagoneer.”

Bree carefully slid the box with the car seat out from under everything else and used a ball-point pen from Claire’s desk to stab and slice the tape holding the box shut. Among the clothing, Brianna found a pseudo-shearling “baby bag” that looked like a pillowcase with sleeves and a head hole, and that unzipped across the bottom, and thought it would make a good going home outfit, thinking about the little lamb hat Fiona had provided for her own trip home from the hospital. Bree decided it made no sense to try to take this prodigious pile of baby supplies to her mom’s room, so she took just the car seat, the clothing she’d picked out, and the inflatable donut. Everything else she’d take directly to the Wagoneer, but how many trips that might take she couldn’t figure.

~~~~~

“You did some serious shopping while I was away, Mom,” Brianna announced as she entered the room with the car seat on her arm.

“Actually, I spent some serious time online during my lunches…and there was the shower.”

“I thought so,” Bree answered with a spark of confirmation.

Bree came closer and put the car seat down at the foot of the bed.

“I grabbed a few things – something for the baby to wear, and something you might need for the ride home,” Brianna declared with a sheepish grin on her face.

She slowly took the inflated donut out of the car seat and handed it to her mom. Claire smiled and blushed. They had always had a good rapport as mother and daughter, but there was something different about Brianna – a new found confidence, an adulthood. Claire wasn’t sure that pre-Scotland Brianna would have actually handed her the donut. She definitely would have brought it, but she more likely would have left it to be found.
“Were you alright in the house alone last night?” Claire asked out of nowhere.

Bree was left speechless for a moment.

“A…yeah…fine…why?” Brianna voiced when she was able to, a flash of Wake from her dream being swatted aside in her brain.

“You just seemed…tired this morning.”

“You should talk, Mom. You had a baby!”

“That’s what I mean, sweetie, you look more tired than I do.”

“It was after two AM before I got to sleep, you know. You’d been asleep for hours before I even left the hospital. I had to drive home, and then I called Fee to tell her the news. And it took me a while to wind down. There was a lot of adrenaline yesterday – and then I come back and stumble into you and Dad having a disagreement.”

“OK, OK, I get it.”

Bree looked over at Jamie holding the baby on his chest, lounging. His eyes were scrunched shut, and he was taking in deep breaths. The baby had his hand on Jamie’s heart. It was beautiful, but heartbreaking to see her father still so on edge.

“Are you sure you want to go home so soon?” Brianna asked very quietly.

Claire smiled her motherly smile, her head tilting and her eyes saying ‘I know what I’m doing’.

“Yes, I’m sure. We need to get into a routine. The baby kept us waiting so long – I know it doesn’t happen like clockwork, babies don’t ever do what you expect, but…three weeks late!”

Brianna laughed silently.
“OK. What do you need me to do? – other than off load a whole baby store from your office to the jeep!”

“The big thing I need you to do, is keep your father as calm as possible. These first few days will be as trying for him as this pregnancy has been.”

“Because of Faith?”

“Among other things.”

Claire now looked over at Jamie. He looked so right with a baby.

“It takes my breath away – I just wish he could have held you like that.”

Claire looked a bit teary.

“He does hold me like that. Whenever Dad hugs me, I feel like a baby in his arms.”

Claire raised her arms, and Brianna fell into them.

“You make him so proud.”

~~~~~

The baby stirred, and Jamie immediately opened his eyes.

“Leanabh maoth, my sweet baby,” Jamie whispered to the boy, “Doona fash, all is well.”

Jamie was switching between Gaelic and English without even thinking, all he was thinking about
was soothing a restless child. Brianna slowly stalked over to the pair, her hair hanging in her face as she leaned in.

“Piuthar,” he said to the boy, pointing at Brianna.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Sister – it’s never too soon to learn.”

“He’ll have an advantage on me in no time – but that just gives me more incentive to learn Gaelic, along with the fact that I’d like to know what’s being muttered in my direction when I’m in Scotland.”

Jamie smiled at first, but then his face took on a questioning look.

“Has there been trouble you’ve no told me about?” the concerned father inquired.

“No, no, but my hearing is far better than even I knew. I can intuit a lot of what’s said, but perhaps if I had a good comeback in Gaelic, they might be more careful with their judgments.”

Jamie’s smile returned.

“Siuthad dhomh pog,” Jamie entreated.

“What?” Brianna asked.

“Give us a kiss.”

Bree kissed her father on the cheek, and as she pulled away, Jamie tapped the baby’s cheek as well, and Bree gave a quick peck to the little boy as well. He made a happy cooing noise and tried to grab Bree’s nose. She snapped back before the little claw could clamp onto her, and stood up.
“He likes you,” Jamie told her.

“I like him too, but…I’m not good at gentle. I don’t want to hurt him.”

Jamie could read the genuine concern in Brianna’s eyes.

“You won’t hurt him. Here – hold him!”

“Oh no no no,” she backed away, opening her fingers wide and moving her hands wide apart, “You don’t want me to do that. I’ve never held a baby, and I’m not about to start.”

Bree was wild-eyed and adamant, having backed away to the far side of the room. The last thing she wanted to do was add any drama to the situation, but the thought of holding, and possibly dropping, her newborn brother was worse.

“I’ll admire him from a distance.”

Just then, the baby started to wail.

“Did I do that?” an overwrought Brianna asked reflexively.

“No, that’s the hungry cry,” Jamie assured his daughter. “Time for bainne-ciche?” he asked the boy.

“Which breast?” he asked Claire as he approached.

“The right this time, at least to start with.”

Claire slipped her right arm out the hospital gown and Jamie had the boy to her breast before the cold air had a chance to touch her. Bree partially turned her back.
“Bree, it’s alright,” Claire told her, “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. It’s the most natural thing in the world, even if it feels absolutely unnatural in the beginning.”

Bree carefully turned the rest of the way around to once again face the three of them. Her arms were protectively crossed on her chest.

“No one’s going to ask you to nurse him.”

“I know…it’s just…it’s just…I don’t know what it is. I’m not comfortable around babies – or anything they do.”

At Claire’s silent urging, Jamie went over and gave Brianna a hug.

“Leannan,” he whispered in her ear, and Brianna melted in his arms, slightly breaking down after the last few days and weeks of stressfulness.

“Sorry if I’m adding to all your problems,” Bree whimpered.

“Och, never. You’ve been my strength through all this. You got my head turned around in the right direction. If you hadna come home, I don’t know what would have happened.” Jamie held her back at arm’s length.

He smiled at her, but something in the hall caught his eye.

“I’ll be back.” Jamie strode with purpose to the door.

“Where are you going?” Brianna asked.

“Fosgail do bhriogas,” he said, barely breaking stride.

“Mom? What did he just say?”
“I couldn’t hear him, What did it sound like?”

“Foss gill dove ree kesh?”

Claire smirked oddly up one side of her face.

“Having a piss, I think.”

“But there’s a bathroom in here.”

“Maybe it was something else, but after all the highlanders I associated with, I know it would have been a phrase I’d have heard often enough.”

By the time Bree turned again and looked out into the hallway, Jamie was nowhere to be seen.

“He’s disappeared. He’s refused to leave the baby’s side up ‘til now, and now what?”

Claire shrugged her shoulders, disturbing the nursing baby for a moment. She took advantage of his momentary stoppage to switch breasts before he latched back on.

“We’ll know when he returns.”

“I just don’t understand what would be so important to him that he’d walk out of this room without you.”

~~~~~

“Claire, Claire, this is Father Declan, the hospital chaplain. He’s agreed to baptize our son before we leave if you…”

His voice trailed off, and his silent question to Claire shined in his eyes.
“It would…give me peace.” Jamie reached his hand out, waiting for Claire to take it.

She reached out and clasped his hand.

“Of course,” she acquiesced with a nod.

Bree once again felt like she was watching a TV show about her parent’s life, and was finding it fascinating. Religion hadn’t really been a part of Brianna’s life, but she understood it was important to her father, so she stood by quietly.

“Father Declan, this is our daughter Brianna,” Jamie introduced.

He proffered his hand and Bree shook it and gave him a shy smile.

“Nice to meet you,” she almost whispered, suddenly feeling like she needed to speak softly as if she’d just entered a church or other sacred space.

Jamie took the boy from Claire’s arms.

“I’ll get him cleaned up, changed and dressed, Bree, could ye help ye’re mam do the same?”

Bree nodded quickly.

“Sure. Do you have anything to wear home?”

“The dress I came to work in yesterday will do fine,” Claire replied, slowly working to pull the covers off her legs.

Brianna got the dress out of the closet, and as soon as Jamie came out of the bathroom with a freshly diapered boy, Bree and her mom headed in so Claire could freshen up too. She was moving a little slow, but her strength never wavered.
“I don’t know how you are even moving this soon after having a baby. You’ve got to hurt everywhere.”

“I do, but I really want to go home. Jamie needs us to go home. He has to know this won’t all go away on him. You’ve seen it, haven’t you? The way he goes from joy to despair, like he just cannot bring himself out of the fear. I think getting us all home will set things in the right direction.”

“I hope so. I hate to see him like this – the highs are so high – the way he smiled last night, but then, the fear I saw in him when I said I was leaving for the night – is he going to be able to let me go back to Scotland?”

“I guess that depends – how much longer can you stay?”

“As long as it takes.”

Bree actually let out a deep breath then, secured by the knowledge that she wouldn’t have to be the one who brought up not going back right away. She wouldn’t have to craft any excuses or explain her choice, and hopefully, the dreams would stop, and the thought of looking into Wake’s eyes wouldn’t turn her guts into warm Jell-o. Time would heal; time would clarify.

Bree helped her mom slip the dress up her arms and took the ties back from Claire after she’d wrapped them in the front so she could tie them.

“Don’t pull it any tighter,” Claire warned, “I’m still tender everywhere.”

“How’s that?” Bree asked as she pulled the loops and ends even.

Claire smiled and nodded her approval to her daughter. She brushed her hands over her head, glad for the short hair, but knowing it had been one more stressor for Jamie, feeling momentarily sorry she hadn’t at least warned him.

“You look really good with short hair, Mom.”

“I hope Jamie eventually thinks so too,” Claire quipped as she took one last glance in the mirror.
before declaring herself ready to face the world.

When Claire and Brianna reentered the room, Jamie had already dressed the infant in the outfit Brianna had brought back from Claire’s office. He had the boy settled across the foot of the bed, and was standing over him, making faces, and speaking to him in Gaelic. The priest was standing at the foot of the bed, cradling his bible. Brianna felt like she had just walked in on a cinematic exorcism, and had the odd impulse to laugh which she masked with a wide-eyed smile and the lowering of her head, hoping no one would ask her to speak, lest let the laugh escape.

Father Declan reached out his hand to guide Claire to the other side of the bed, facing Jamie, standing at the baby’s head while Jamie had his hands wrapped around the infant’s torso. It was all incoherent mumbling to Brianna, but she could see both her parents breathing more calmly, especially Jamie. Bree watched with fascination as the priest poured a few drops of water on her baby brother’s head three times.

“I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and you will be known in the kingdom of heaven as…” the priest stopped and looked to Claire and then Jamie.

Jamie looked into Claire’s eyes and smiled as he slowly stated, “Alexander Murtaugh Ian Fraser.”

“The child shall be named Alexander Murtaugh Ian in the eyes of the lord.”

He finished anointing the child’s forehead and crossed himself. Jamie and Claire followed suit. Bree could see the tears clinging in the corners of her mother’s eyes, and assumed she’d see the same if her father was facing her.

~~~~~

The moment Jamie said those names, in that order, I was pretty sure he must have looked at the listing I’d made of names I wanted to use. With Jamie repeatedly telling me that we only make girls together, I assumed he’d never really considered the boys names I’d written out, but he must have. Alexander Murtaugh Ian Fraser was my first choice for a son, honoring Jamie, his god father, and his best friend and beloved nephew. There were so many other people who have been important to Jamie in his many years, but I think his first lifetime will always have the deepest meaning to him. Those names struck a chord with me, and clearly they’d had the same effect on Jamie.

~~~~~
Jamie made sure I had my hands on the little boy with the big new name, giving me a nod before he let go. He gave the priest a rib crushing hug, catching the man a bit off guard.

“You doona know what this means to me,” he spoke in the man’s ear, letting him go again so quickly he had to grab the bed to keep his footing.

“Thank-you, very much,” I added.

“My pleasure,” he replied, seeming genuinely warmed by Jamie’s effusive response.

“I’m not always so welcome, and never sought out the way you did it, sir.”

Jamie nodded and turned bright pink, and we all waved as he left the room, looking back over his shoulder several times. I think we, or Jamie, may have made his day – maybe even his week by how fulfilled he looked just before he turned into the traffic in the hall.

I picked Alex up and settled him over my heart, cooing to him. He was so even tempered you’d never know less than twenty-four hours ago he was still physically part of me. The transition can be difficult for both mother and child, but it seemed we’d come through the birth more or less without damage. I was certainly glad there’d been no difficulties with the delivery, for my sake, to be sure, but this had been hard enough on Jamie, and any complications could have sent him over the edge.

Jamie put his hand on Brianna’s shoulder.

“I’ll help you gather the things from your Mam’s office. This family needs to go home.”

Bree nodded.

“Mom, I’ll get the base for the car seat installed when we take the first load down.”

“You think you know how?” I half-teased.
“Mom, I have a degree in architecture, I think I can install a car seat.”

And for the first time, I was completely alone with my son.
Wow! This chapter/month resulted in 746 hits! I'd like to thank my loyal readers, as well as the more recent discoverers - but I gotta ask - what happened this month? Is Droughtlander finally overwhelming everyone? Gotta have that Jamie fix, no matter what form it comes in? I am overwhelmed by the increased interest.

OK, on to today's chapter - I've used the Gaelic phrase "Taimse 'im chodladh" as something Jamie says in here - I found it in the credits of a Clannad or Enya album, along with it's meaning, and thought it appropriate to the situation - just hope in this case that the Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic are interchangeable, and that I've not stuck my foot in it.

Foursome

Alex’s gaze followed Jamie out the door, but then he looked back at me. I swear he looked pensive, unsure why I was the one he was left with since he was not hungry at the moment, and that was already how he saw me. As I made kissy faces at him, I found myself transported back to the day Brianna was born. I had felt so alone, so sad that Jamie would never see his little girl. How glad I am to know that I was wrong about that. Brianna has absolutely blossomed in the short time she’s known her father, and I know how much Jamie has been relying on her existence to soothe him when he was his most worried about me and this wee one. I found myself silently praying that we would all be safe now; that the traumas were all behind us; that fear had been stomped out by hope.

~ ~ ~ ~

“Just popping in between trips to the car,” Jamie said as he came into the room and gave me a lingering kiss, and then gave one to Alex as well.

“He missed you while you were out of the room,” I relayed, knowing it would bring a smile to his lips even as it left me feeling ambivalent.

I had given birth to this boy less than twenty-four hours ago, and he already preferred the company of his father!
“Aye?” Jamie questioned with the smile I had anticipated, reaching out his finger for Alex to curl his hand around.

“Where’s Bree?”

“Installing that contraption to hold the car seat in place – she said she’d be up in a minute.”

I felt an odd expression overtake my face, trying to hide my disbelief in her ability to set it up correctly. I didn’t doubt Brianna’s intelligence, but her inexperience with babies and their gear left me wondering if she had the touch for such things.

“Are you sure she was coming back here, or back to my office?” I asked as the minutes ticked away.

“I’ll go check,” Jamie warmly toned, and I could tell he was wondering the same thing.

“Och, look at you,” he burred in Alex’s face.

He looked up at me and smiled with overwhelming pride. As the time from Alex’s birth ticked along, Jamie’s spirits were lifting. He hadn’t lost either of us. A doctor had reassured him. A priest had welcomed our son’s soul into the church’s keeping. I think he was beginning to feel the possibilities, and it was buoying his spirits.

Some time later, Jamie returned, but still without Brianna.

“The lass is still frigging with the seatbelts and such, and she has definitely learnt a few words while she’s been in Scotland,” Jamie said, leaning in again to kiss both mother and son.

“We’ve gotten all the Wagoneer can hold stuffed in the back and foot spaces – just enough left for our family of four. Bree said she’d come back tomorrow to collect the rest. Are you ready to go home?”

“You have no idea how much,” I gushed, “Just one more thing before we go.”
I pulled the little lamb hat Fiona had made for Brianna out from under my pillow. I’d taken it from my bag when I gave Bree the keys to my office.

“Bree wore this home after she was born, and I’d like Alex to wear it, too.”

Jamie nodded agreeably.

“Aye.”

We collaborated on getting the hat on Alex’s head, and I thumb-pressed the little lamb ears so they would stand up proud. Between the hat and the shearling outfit, it was like we had the runt of the litter, our own mutton as lamb.

Jamie collected the car seat and placed it on the lounger, making sure it was stable. I carefully handed over our son and watched as Jamie pulled him close to his chest and rubbed his hand down the boy’s back. With one hand surrounding the baby’s head, he set Alex into the seat and began strapping him in. I eased my way off the bed, hoping I could escape before someone forced me into a wheelchair, but one of my favorite nurses suddenly appeared with a hospital chariot – one nurse powered.

“Uh uh uh,” she chastised, “You know the rules. You ride outta here.”

I sighed deeply, knowing there was no way around this rule.

“As long as you make it a smooth ride.”

“I’ve never had a complaint,” she proudly announced, setting the wheel locks so it wouldn’t skate away on me when I tried to sit.

I took the inflatable donut Bree had brought, placing it in the wheelchair. I carefully settled into the sling seat and put my feet up on the plates. I couldn’t say it was comfortable, but it was manageable.
I looked to Jamie and gave him a nod, and he picked up the car seat. Alex was secure, and together we headed to the elevators.

“Bree found a curbside space. She thought you might prefer it to the parking garage,” Jamie parleyed as he was keeping pace next to me.

I released a deep breath and nodded.

The elevator released us into a brightly lit foyer. It was not my normal way of entering or exiting the hospital. The level of light was dazzling. As the door to the outside slid open ahead of us, I was reminded this was August. A hot, sticky breath of humidity descended upon us, and the heat from the dark pavement radiated upward. But the warmth actually felt good.

As we approached the Wagoneer, all I could see was Brianna’s backside in the right side back doorway. She was still trying to install the hardware that would allow the car seat to snap in and out.

“Mac na galla,” she snarled. Jamie went to her side.

“Some phrases you’ve learnt better than others,” he quipped.

Bree turned quickly, and I could tell she wanted to be angry with Jamie, but she smiled instead, her father’s tone defusing her anger. She leaned back against the side of jeep and shook her head.

“I can’t do it. The instructions make no sense. I’m sorry mom.”

“It’s OK, Bree. Let me do it.”

I locked the wheels myself and pushed myself out of the wheelchair. Bree cleared out of my way and with a snap, a click and a ratcheting sound I had correctly stabilized the base for the car seat.

“How…but…what did I…Mom?” Brianna sputtered.
I tightly grasped Bree’s arm and made her look into my eyes.

“It’s a mom superpower,” I enlightened her with a delighted smiled on my face that I could feel.

Bree pulled me in tight and put her lips to my ear.

“I could never do this,” my daughter confessed, but I was not convinced.

My little girl is a survivor, and far stronger and more capable than she knows. A few months ago she expressed a similar sentiment when Jamie presented her with the idea of restoring Lallybroch, but she had risen to the challenge. Part of me wanted to reassure her that she could do anything she desired; that nothing was beyond her, but she wasn’t looking for me to get preachy, she was simply telling me that I was strong and could live up to the challenges of being the mother to a baby once more – at least that’s what I thought she meant.

~~~

Bree headed to the driver’s side, making the silent statement that she was driving us home. Jamie moved in next to me and brought the baby seat up in front of him until Alex was in front of us both. There was a wave of overwhelming emotion as we both looked upon our new son. I took a deep breath and then looked at Jamie. I could have stood there, warmed by his expression for hours if not for the other thing overwhelming me – I couldn’t stand up much longer.

I gently wrested control of the car seat into my hands and clicked it into place, making sure Alex seemed contented. It was hard to look away from him. We had waited so long, worried so much, and now he was here, alive and well against so many odds. I looked once more into Jamie’s eyes, and he could see I was on the verge of emotional disintegration. He leaned into me and slipped one arm around my back and the other under my knees. He placed the softest kiss on my lips and slipped me into the passenger seat in the front of the jeep. He put me down softly, thank God, but it was Bree who once again saved the day, handing me the inflated donut. I slipped it beneath myself and felt instantly less pained.

Once I was settled, Jamie kissed me once again, and closed the door. He locked and closed the back door after giving Alex a nuzzle, and he walked around the back of the car to get in behind Bree.

He was singularly attentive to the baby, and Bree was singularly attentive to the traffic. That left
me singularly alone with my thoughts. I closed my eyes and promptly fell asleep.

~~~~~

I awoke at twilight, having slept quite soundly once I knew we were headed home. I found myself dressed in a loose-fitting nightgown that greatly reminded me of the shift I had been wearing on my first wedding night with Jamie. It was thin and gauzy with a tied neck that was hanging below my clavicles.

The usually white décor of the first floor bedroom had been replaced with copious amounts of maroon, and it felt rich and sumptuous. It took me a few moments to know where I was and to remember the events of the last day and a half.

“Jamie?” I called out, sitting up in the bed.

“Oh,” I moaned, cradling my breasts.

I didn’t know if Alex was ready to nurse, but I hoped so.

“Jamie?” I called out again.

“He just woke up too,” Jamie said as he entered the doorway with the baby tucked into the crook of his neck. Alex was just starting to fuss a bit.

“Is he hungry, because I’m about to burst,” I confessed.

I untied the neck of my nightgown and it dropped off my shoulders and pooled around my waist. I reached out my arms to receive the baby, and he eagerly sought out a nipple. I was half-relieved as he took the pressure off my left breast. I settled back and sighed. Jamie sat sideways on the bed and watched us. He took it all in wide-eyed.

“Is this the first time you’ve seen a baby nursing?” I asked, seeing how intrigued Jamie was by what was happening before him.
He nodded and licked his lips.

“Never?” I sought to confirm.

“Aye.”

A wicked smiled crept up his face, and then he blushed as well.

“I’ve seen plenty of breasts, ye ken, even had a few in my mouth, but they never fed me.”

I blushed and smiled in return. It was good to hear him joking.

I switched Alex to the other side to take the pressure off the right breast, and hopefully even up my current lop-sided look. It had been quite some time since I had nursed a baby, until yesterday. But I was quickly remembering the feeling. I thought about the last time I’d nursed Brianna. She bit me, and that’s why it was the last time I’d nursed her. It had been well past time to wean her, but it had made me feel close to Jamie, and it soothed Bree in a way nothing else did.

I smiled and looked up at Jamie, my smile disappearing as my lower lip began to quiver. He was quickly at my side.

“Sassenach?”

“Memories,” I gulped out.

“Aye,” he replied, leaning in and touching his forehead to my temple.

~~~~~

Jamie didn’t want me to have to do anything for myself. He brought the baby in for each feeding, and then took him again, burped him, changed him if necessary. Bree brought me my meals. I
almost felt as if I must sneak in my trips to the bathroom, lest Jamie catch me out of the bed. I know he’s still scared, but it hasn’t even been twenty-four hours since I got home, and I’m going stir crazy. It’s not like I’m trying to run a marathon, or really exert myself in any way, and I am physically spent from anything I do, but how am I to build my strength up again if Jamie won’t even let me take a piss unaided?

I’ll give him some leeway, considering how hard this pregnancy was on him, but I’m still not the meek and obedient type, so if this goes on too long, I shall be reminding him.

In the meantime, I was going to try to enjoy being pampered, even if I didn’t. It’s well meant.

~~~~~

Bree came into the media room, surprised to find Jamie in her makeshift bedroom. He was holding Alex, balancing him in the groove between his bent up knees to support the newborn. Bree froze for a moment, not wanting to wake the baby if he was truly asleep, terrified that Jamie would again ask her to hold her baby brother. Jamie looked up and signaled her down the side ramp to join him in the seating pit. Her apprehension was obvious in her stilted gate. She made it down the ramp, but stood watching her father and brother rather than joining them.

“I’ve done this so many times as an uncle or grand uncle,” he began, “But never before as a father…I did hold William as a bairn, but I could not love him openly, and you…” he said, turning his gaze to Brianna, “You were centuries away, in a different Inverness than the one that was only miles from me.”

His words brought tears to Brianna’s eyes, and she found herself clearing her throat, unable to talk around the lump in it. She came to sit by their side, trying not to jostle the newborn as she landed. Without a word, Jamie signaled her to snuggle in by his side, and put an arm around her.

After a few moments of silence, Brianna asked, “you were an uncle?”

“Aye…My sister, Jenny, had…quite a few bairns – it always soothed me to hold one of her newborns, and imagine I was holding you, or…Faith. A new life helps soothe the pain of a lost one. You feel the small, secure bundle in your arms, warm against your chest, and you feel the fragility of new life, but the strength as well.”

Jamie had tears streaming down his cheeks, but he was smiling, looking into the face of his new
son, and squeezing his daughter tight to his side. Bree sighed and relaxed, closing her eyes. Jamie glanced over at Brianna and back to Alex. The two faces were peaceful and content.

“Seall sin,” Jamie whispered, feeling that both his children were sleeping. “Taimse ‘im chodladh,” rolled off his tongue in the softest tones, speaking for the sleeping ones words that mean ‘I am asleep and don’t waken me’.

~~~~~

The baby let off a soft cry, but it was enough to awaken Brianna from her nap as well.

“Shh,” Jamie soothed both his children.

Bree sat back up, perching at the edge of the couch, letting Jamie have both hands to hold onto the newborn again.

“Is he hungry again?” she asked.

“Nah, just a bit fussy. He’s new to this world, canna understand what he is feeling yet. But as long as he knows I’m here, that he’s secure, safe, he’ll calm.”

“You know so much about babies,” Bree said pensively.

“Aye…like I said, my sister had a brood of them, but I think fate had a hand in that. We were both young when our mother died, but Jenny stepped right up, as a wee thing of ten years old. She was mother to me as much as sister. She had the calling – motherhood was in her blood.”

“She was older?” Bree asked.

“Aye, but just – about two years or so. We may not have always seen eye to eye, but you couldna fault her mothering…except for letting me have a hand in young Ian’s rearing,” Jamie recalled with a smirk.
Bree cracked a smile at his self-deprecation.

“What was she like?” Brianna asked, “Other than being a good mother.”

“Jenny…Jenny was a force of nature with a spine of tempered steel…She and your mam became close. Claire delivered one of the bairns – I think that helped cement their bond. I know Jenny felt wounded by your mam’s disappearance after Culloden, but it was not the time to tell what had happened…yet.”

Bree nodded as she listened, learning about an aunt of whom she would never have first-hand knowledge. She found herself trying to picture this woman.

“What did she look like? Am I from a long line of tall red-heads?”

“Och no, she never did get much bigger than the wee thing she started as – and she was dark haired – took more after our father in her coloring.”

Jamie turned his attentions back toward Alex. He took the small boy’s hands into his, holding each pudgy palm between his thumb and forefinger. He extended the baby’s arms out to the sides, pumping them open and closed like a freshly hatched butterfly exploring its new wings.

Bree may have known nothing about babies, but she recognized exercises when she saw them.

“He’ll be wielding a sword in no time,” Brianna commented.

“Aye,” Jamie whispered out, “but perhaps he’ll learn to crawl first.”

~~~~~

Jamie slept with Alex on his chest, and neither of them stirred for hours on end. It was only hunger that awakened this child, for he could not have been more content. I remembered fondly the look of Jamie holding a baby, how it allowed him to speak his painful truths to another soul without judgment. I wondered what truths he’d reveal to Alex before the child’s age of remembering. Would he impart centuries of knowledge, imbue our son with an innate ability to endure?
Jamie was still a man ahead of his time, despite how far time had marched.

I needed to sleep, but I found myself staring at the two of them. As wonderful as it was going to be for me to raise a child with Jamie, getting to see Jamie raise a child would be a remarkable gift. I wondered how different Bree would have been had she had Jamie in her life from day one like Alex does. Would she have been able to avoid some of the pitfalls of life that I could not prepare her for? I also briefly wondered if Bree would harbor any resentment toward her baby brother for getting two parents when she only had one, but I knew it wasn’t in her nature. Bree being here was a godsend. And just like a book I used to read to Brianna when she was young, I knew Jamie could love them both without either of them feeling shorted.

~~~~~

I needed a shower, and there were no two ways about it. I hadn’t had a chance to fully clean up since the birth, and I hadn’t had a shower since I left for work two days ago. Everything still hurt, but the feeling of hot water cascading over my skin was calling me.

I finally fell asleep after hours of watching Jamie with Alex sleeping on his chest. I couldn’t believe how quickly four hours went by, Alex needing to be feed yet again. Jamie barely woke me, so I only have a surreal impression of Alex taking his next meal, but I’m pretty sure I nursed Brianna when I was actually asleep more than once.

They were asleep beside me, so I took advantage and inched my way toward the bathroom. Brianna must have read my mind, for my robe was hanging on the back of the door, and a change of clothes sat folded on the sink bench. I nodded and smiled. Bree was often a step ahead of me, trading the mother/daughter roles on me. But I needed to reclaim my “mother” role, and get back on my feet so Brianna could be back on her way to Scotland. She had a life of her own to lead.

I stood with the water pouring over me as long as my legs would hold me. I found another reason to like my short hair – shampoo, rinse, and repeat took a quarter of the time it had with long hair. Up until now, I’d found the built in shower bench to be a hindrance, but it took on a new vital role. I liberated the hand shower and slithered to the bench. I slowed the water to a whisper and lavaged my nether regions.

At least I felt clean, if not completely refreshed, as I left the bathroom. I checked on Jamie and the baby, found them still sleeping and decided I was not the breakfast in bed type, nor lunch, nor supper.
I could already smell the coffee as I approached the kitchen.

“Good morning, Bree,” I greeted, and then sucked in a deep breath of wafting coffee.

“Mom? Should you be up?”

“You’ve been listening to your father’s worries. I should have been up as soon as I woke from my nap yesterday. I can’t just lie around. I’ve had a lovely shower, and now, I need food.”

Bree smiled, and offered no further resistance.

“Is it alright if I help you with breakfast?” she asked, clearly not wanting to step on the toes of my independence.

“I welcome it,” I assured her, slowly taking a seat, and breathing a sigh as it wasn’t too painful.

“I take it Dad doesn’t know about breakfast or the shower?” she asked as she took the several steps over to the counter and poured me a cup of coffee.

“No he does not. He is sleeping, as is Alex, and I hope that continues to be true until I’ve eaten my fill and returned to their side.”

“You know he’s just scared for you two,” Bree offered as explanation for Jamie’s behavior.

“I know,” I said with a nod, accepting the warm mug from her.

“Toast?”

“If it’s made out a slice of that cinnamon bread,” I inveigled.

I knew that made more work for Bree than just jamming a couple of slices of bread into the toaster
oven, but she seemed agreeable. She looked at my hopeful smile and rolled her eyes for a moment, but broke into broad grin and laughed a bit. I could see the relief in her face.

It was supposed to be quick thing – she’d pop home, I’d have my baby, she’d get back to life in Scotland. But the days dragged on, and she’d had to do some heavy emotional lifting since she’d been here.

She put her hand on my shoulder. I put my hand on top of hers and looked back up at her.

“I am glad you’re here,” I told her.

“Me too.”

I slathered my cinnamon toast with butter and enjoyed the indulgence. I would need a more substantial meal before this day was over, but for the time being, this absolutely hit the spot. I finished my coffee and was hit by an uncontrollable need to yawn. I had no objection to sleeping when I was sleepy, so I would now return to my bed, and hope Jamie had not been aware of my absence.

~~~~~

I might have succeeded in my ruse had I several identical nightgowns, but my clean one was just enough different, with a thin elastic draw-cord instead of a drawstring, that Jamie noticed. His nose wrinkled as he looked over my fresh attire.

“Can you not even last a week, Sassenach, without goin’ against my wishes?” Jamie barely whispered, clearly emotional – one might almost say hormonal.

“Did you at least enlist Brianna’s assistance?”

“Jamie,” I said with a smirk and a shake of my head.

He looked wounded, and my expression sobered.
“You’ve never known me to take orders well. I can’t change who I am now. But I can promise you, I won’t put my life at risk, and I will be here for you and Alex. Our miracle is far from over.”

I reached out to his cheek and stroked it with my thumb.

“Please, let me be who I am. I’m just feeling my way right now, just like you.”

Jamie nodded, but his features were still tight, tense. My hand slipped down to Alex’s chest and I felt his heart beating, strong and steady. Jamie exhaled and closed his eyes.

“Our miracle,” he repeated, his head taking on the extreme angle needed to see his son on his shoulder, but he kept his eyes shut and nuzzled Alex’s head with his chin.

~~~~~

I think Bree was relieved when she ducked out to bring home the rest of the baby supplies from my office. I don’t think Jamie had been actively trying to get Brianna to hold Alex, but I think that idea was in her mind now. And Jamie and I were all about the baby right now, and that held no interest for Bree.

Our daughter is a loving, beautiful woman, but in all her life I had never seen her take interest in a human baby. She’d been quite affectionate toward our dog, but he was a rescue, and never a puppy when we knew him. The closest I think Bree ever got to holding a baby was when her third grade class hatched chicken eggs, and she took a particular liking to one of the chicks. While holding it in her palms, it wriggled loose and plowed up her shoulder into her hair where it snuggled into the fold of her neck.

Somewhere I have a picture the teacher took of a tiny pair of eyes and a beak peering out of her hair. For about a week I thought I would be the grandmother of a Speckled Sussex hen, but Brianna’s interest waned.

Bree arrived back at Griff’s house with more than just what was left in my office.

“I passed a farmer’s market on my way, so I swung back by it and picked up a few things for
dinner – oh, and I picked up a couple of pounds of ground chuck too. I thought maybe burgers for
dinner? And I got several kinds of lettuce, heirloom tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, yellow and
green squash – I thought maybe I could make stuffed peppers or a pseudo – lasagna – I’ll even try
my hand at a stir-fry if you like!”

“I feel Fiona’s fine hand at work here,” I replied.

Bree blushed a bit.

“So far she’s just sent me home with left-overs, but I might be able to reproduce some of her
meals… within reason.”

“I’m sure Jamie will help you.”

“I’m counting on that.”

~~~~~

Things started getting closer to normal as evening rolled around. I was minding the baby at the
kitchen table, where he slept in the car seat, while Jamie and Brianna collaborated on the dinner.
They playfully cajoled each other, once again displaying how much alike they were. I found
myself verging on tears as I watched them. Even having lost so many years of bonding time, there
was this undeniable connection between Brianna and Jamie, and I could imagine the bond that was
going to grow between Alex and Jamie as the years went by.

As unconventional as it was, our family unit was finally complete. There was a two-hundred
seventy some-odd year gap between our children, but our family had taken on its final
configuration.

~~~~~

I don’t know what we would have done if Brianna hadn’t come back to Boston. Jamie, Alex and I
became virtual shut-ins in these early days. Jamie didn’t want to leave me to my own devices lest I
do something daring – like try to shower on my own again, or walk down the front steps and
collect the mail. He was letting up on the reins a bit more each day, but some deep-seated fear was
keeping him from leaving the house.
Perhaps he was afraid Alex and I would disappear in a puff of smoke and be lost to him. Thoughts like that made me sad, but what seemed like irrational fears on the part of anyone else were reasonable possibilities given our experiences together.

I had done it before – disappeared, leaving a befuddled husband - an entire life – behind. Jamie also pointed out that I had been a magnet for trouble from the moment we’d met, and he doubted that had changed over the interceding two hundred and fifty years.

~~~

Jamie went as far as the street when he heard the Wagoneer pulling into the garage. He made sure Brianna pulled in safely from her daily shopping run, collected the papers and mail, and was there to greet Bree at the door that led to the garage. He took several bags from her hands and brought them into the kitchen.

“I can handle the rest,” Brianna’s voice echoed in the garage.

While Jamie waited for Bree to bring the rest of her purchases in, he thumbed through the incoming mail, and smiled with childlike delight at the mustard yellow padded envelope in the pile.

With a sigh, Bree dropped her bags on the counter.

“A package has come,” Jamie excitedly engaged Brianna.

She looked a bit nervous.

“It’s not from Fiona, is it?” she almost fearfully asked.

“Should we be expecting something from Fiona?” I asked.

“Maybe,” was all she said, and then she became very focused on getting the groceries put away.
Jamie and I smirked at each other over Bree’s odd behavior, sure there was a story behind her reaction. I shrugged my shoulders at Jamie.

“No, lass, this is something I ordered – something I hope will make the cut for movie night.”

“Oh?”

“Aye – I’m not sure if it’s to your taste, but I took a chance.”

Jamie prized the flap on the envelope up with his thumb and slid the DVD case out.

“What is it?” Bree asked as she finally came back over to us by the kitchen table.

My attention was taken by Alex for a moment, but I tried to keep one eye on the proceedings between Jamie and Brianna.

“It’s an earlier incarnation of Flash Gordon.”

“Jesus H Roosevelt Christ,” reflexively rolled off my lips. “I saw some of those in the theatre. When Uncle Lamb and I were in the civilized parts of the world, we’d often fill our time with trips to the cinema.”

“Were they good?” Bree asked.

“It was a simpler time – we had much lower expectations,” I said shaking my head ever so slightly, “but I found them enjoyable – however, it may have had more to do with the fact that were weren’t living in a tent and digging our own pit toilet. A night at the cinema was pure luxury.”

~~~~~

As Jamie helped settle me in bed, I sighed as softly as I could, hoping it would avoid detection.
“I thought you were out of pain, Sassenach. You led me to believe you were on the mend, and I should let you resume normal activities.”

I could see way more of the whites of his eyes than I could when Jamie was happy. And his tone spoke volumes. He held his head at an odd angle, and I could tell something was brewing in his mind. His lips were pursed as he gave a very sharp gaze.

“Alright, Jamie, I confess, if I have one, it hurts.”

I followed my words with a sheepish grin.

“But I wouldn’t have it any other way, because it’s for the best reason in the world, and I would very much like to hold that reason now. Leave Alex with me. Bree needs some one on one time with her father, and I need some one on one time with Alex. Go watch your movie. The two of us will be fine for a couple of hours.”

Jamie nodded slowly and put the baby into my arms.

“Call out if you need me,” Jamie encouraged.

He couldn’t resist reaching out and putting his hand on Alex, and then putting the same hand on me, using it to support himself as he leaned in to give me a kiss.

“Alright, Sassenach.”

It took Jamie three tries to actually leave the room, the draw of Alex so strong, but he knew Brianna awaited, as did Flash Gordon, in the media room, and there was a tradition to uphold. It may have been less than a year old, but movie night already played a very important role in Jamie and Bree’s interactions.

When Jamie made it the threshold of our bedroom, I picked up Alex’s hand and waved. The smile blossomed across Jamie’s face, and he nodded as he finally left the room.
“Finally alone together,” I said to Alex, settling him across my chest, with his ear right above my heart.

~~~~~

Brianna sighed as the movie ended.

“What is it, lass?” Bree smiled at him, but bit her bottom lip.

“Um, Cassidy does know everything, right?”

“Aye. Joe told her – had to. She was a bright wee one – too smart to lie to, and verra intuitive.”

“I thought so…just wanted to make sure. I didn’t want to start talking about something and have her give me a strange look.”

“So, you’ve kept in touch?” Jamie inquired with a smile, so glad to think of the surrogate daughter who’d eased his heart, and his real daughter, taking to each other.

“Yeah. It’s been nice. I haven’t had a close friend in a long time – and never one I could talk to about anything – even the really weird stuff in my life. I hope we have more time to get together – we went out once after I got back to Scotland. She’s easy to talk to. I feel like I can trust her.”

“Ye can. Joe’s taught her well, Finn too. I’ve had few people in my lives whom I could trust with the truth. I took Joe into my confidence when he was just a lad – a lad who needed someone he could trust. I confided in him, and he confided in Finn, and when they thought the time was right, they shared my truth with Cass. They are people to be trusted – confided in.”

Brianna nodded.

“She’s already helped me sort out a few things.”

“Good.”
Jamie flexed the muscle in the arm he had around Bree’s shoulder, pulling Bree tighter. He could tell by the way Brianna made her last statement that she was not going to elaborate. Whatever she and Cassidy had spoken about would remain between the two girls.

“So…what did you think? Of those earlier Flash Gordons?”

“I love how much the Ming in these was reproduced in the film from the ‘80’s. They kept the look very close – like an homage.”

“Aye. And I can see why they chose Buster Crabbe to go into the pictures – he wasna hard on the eyes, now was he?”

“What do you mean they chose him?” Bree asked.

“He was an athlete – Olympic swimming champion – I was fortunate enough to be in Amsterdam in ’28 and Los Angeles in ’32 when he competed. He stood out from the competition, and he wasna a half bad actor, either,” Jamie said with a tilt to his head.

“He was pretty good,” Brianna concurred.

Jamie smiled up at the ceiling and squeezed Bree’s shoulder.

“It’s been nice having some time alone wi’ ye. I know it seems Alex is the center of our universe just now, but – “

“I understand. He needs you a lot more that I do right now.”

“True as that may be, don’t think your mam and I love you any less, or think your troubles are unimportant to us. I know I put a lot on your shoulders once you were here.”

Jamie shook his head in dismay.
Bree reached up and kissed Jamie on the cheek and then leaned her head onto his chest, listening to his heart beat much the way Alex was hearing Claire’s heart.
Brother, Friend, Uncle, Father

Brother, Friend, Uncle, Father

It took a lot of convincing, but Brianna was finally able to make Jamie go with her to the market. I smiled down at Alex, snuggled on his back, framed by my legs, on the lower part of the bed. He still primarily saw me as his meal-ticket, but he no longer looked at me with suspicion when we were left alone together. Jamie’s attentiveness to Alex is endearing, but sometimes I do feel a little left out. I’m beginning to wonder if Alex will miss me, or remember me at all, when I go back to work, but the kind of love Jamie is bringing into this small boy’s life…

I know Jamie was adamant that I do nothing but rest, relax, and keep an eye on Alex while he and Bree are out of the house, but I don’t want my son to see me doing nothing and always being taken care of by a man – even one as well-meaning as Jamie.

“Yes, that’s right,” I brightly said to Alex, “We’re getting up, getting dressed, and getting this day going. I’m not an invalid, despite the amount of time I’ve been spending in this bed lately.”

I was never out of sight of Alex for more than a second or two as I grabbed items from my closet. Nightgowns and robes had been the mainstay of my wardrobe for the last week and a half, but it was about time I put on some real clothes and felt truly human again. I had felt huge in the days leading up to Alex’s birth, but my weight gain had been average so I expected all but my tightest jeans to fit, if not now, soon. But I was not quite ready to squeeze myself into anything so confining. A pair of leggings would have to do.

Finally clad, I picked up Alex and kissed him on the side of his face. He snuggled in, allowing me a free hand to collect the car seat so I would have a place to set him should I need to put him down. We were off to the kitchen as our starting point.

~~~~~

I had not felt the warmth of the sun on my skin since the day we brought Alex home, but a beautiful square of sunlight shone in from the patio doors, drawing me. I opened one of the French doors and stood at the threshold, just the tips of my toes being outside. A refreshing breeze blew, tingling my scalp. I felt suddenly energized and at peace at the same time. There was still an outside world. A world with blue skies and green grass and the distant sounds of both birds and cars, trains and pedestrians.
I stepped onto the bluestone and was transported into the full Technicolor of a New England summer day.

Alex clenched a bit the first time the wind tickled his skin.

“It’s just the wind, love,” I murmured, slowly walking to the edge of the bluestone.

I sighed and closed my eyes. Alex fussed again, opening my eyes. I shielded him quickly from the full sun I had wandered into, pulling my t-shirt up around him like a shroud.

“It’s OK,” I soothed.

I was about to go back into the house when I heard the flap on the postal box. I had an uncontrollable urge to collect whatever letters or enticements I would find. The path around the house was relatively level, or I never would have considered making the trip with Alex. As it was, I put him in the car seat to carry him around to the front. Our postal box had plenty of capacity for letters and cards, but lacked the area for large packages. A box was perched atop of the post to which the postal box was affixed. I moved in close enough to read the return address.

“Oh, what have you sent now, Fee?” I questioned the familiar mailing label adorned with the Scottish flag.

“Something for Jamie, it seems. Perhaps this is whatever made Brianna blush and slink away the day those DVDs arrived!”

~~~~~

“I can’t believe this is the first time we’ve actually shopped together – for food I mean.”

“Aye, lass.” Jamie smiled.

There were so many firsts he was about to experience with his son, but there were many still left between him and Brianna as well. He stood just gazing at her for a long time. He was snapped out of his introspection by a sound he was just now growing used to.
“Dad?” Bree called out.

She stood waiting for him to reply to his new title.

“Och,” he breathed out, patting his hand on his heart, “Hearing that still gives my heart a jolt.”

“Sorry.”

“No, never apologize for that. You have no idea how long I dreamed of hearin’ a child of mine call to me, call to ‘Da’, or ‘Dad’,” he corrected to reflect Bree’s choice for parental designation.

“Dad,” she said just so he could hear it again. Jamie smiled and blushed as he gave Bree a quick hug.

“Brianna,” he said in return, so proud that he could call her by name and that she could call him ‘Dad’.

They had picked up a cart full of groceries, far more than either had on their mental lists heading into the store.

“Is there gonna be enough room to put all this away?”

“Aye, we’ll manage – we’ll just eat half of it tonight!”

Bree broke into a broad smile.

“It’s nice to hear you joking.”

Jamie just nodded, his cheeks starting to hurt from holding the smile on his face.
“Now we just need to get you home before the baby withdrawal starts.”

“We’d better hurry, then,” he offered, half joking, half jones-ing for the smell and feel of Alex.

~~~~

The effort of walking around the house with Alex and collecting the mail had taken much of my energy. Perhaps I was expecting to bounce back too quickly. Being a mother at 50 was not going to be the same as being a mother at 30, but I was determined to find the strength to be an active mother to this boy. He deserved no less.

I had come back in to the kitchen and set Alex on the table, and sat there myself, going through the post. I was tempted to open the parcel from Fiona, but if it was the package Brianna seemed so nervous about us receiving, I very much wanted to see her reaction when Jamie opened it. Knowing Fiona as I did, Bree’s nerves were likely well warranted.

I let them both finish bringing in their purchases for the day before I said a thing. I did catch a look from Jamie, questioning why I was out of bed, but he made the several trips in and out of the garage without stopping to admonish me. He did, however, reproach me when he noticed the mail sitting on the table. He stood looking down at me, left hand gripped to his hip.

“Sassenach?” he mildly growled.

“I did not take him down the stairs – we walked around from the back.”

His right eyebrow rose. I found myself sheepishly grinning at his disapproval.

“Mom, you got dressed!” Brianna announced.

“Yes, I did,” I replied, kind of throwing it in Jamie’s face.

“Aye, she did,” Jamie murmured.
He caressed my face with one giant paw, and gave me a welcoming kiss.

“The lad is sleeping?” he whispered as he looked beyond me.

“He is, quite soundly too.”

“Package?” he inquired as he looked over the mail.

“Yes, from Fiona, in fact – perhaps the one Bree alluded to the other day.”

I saw Bree go stiff momentarily, but she masked it well.

Jamie took his pocket knife out of his pocket and sliced the packing tape. There was a folded bit of paper tucked over the contents of the box. Jamie removed it and handed it to me.

“Would you like the honor?” he asked.

I smiled and nodded, unfolding the note.

“Dear Jamie and Claire, I intended to send this with Brianna, but her reasons for not carrying it were valid. I’m sure you’ll put the contents to good use in the months to come,

With love, Fiona and Roger.

Jamie was chuckling as he inspected the contents.

“What is it?” I asked, “What did she send?”

I looked at Jamie and then at Brianna. Both had pink faces, but for very different reasons. Jamie was quivering with laughter while Bree was clearly embarrassed. He finally took one of the items out of the box and handed it to me.
“Fiona knows us well,” he quipped.

A smirk overtook my face as well, as I read the labels – back and then front.

“Custom condoms – say it with latex…Lock Ness Monster Condoms – Don’t be Messy…Use a Nessie! – oh, Fee,” I snorted, “Oh, Bree, you could have brought us this.”

“No, I couldn’t. Do you have any idea what Homeland Security would think if they found a thousand condoms in my luggage? I’d be detained as either a possible drug mule or a prostitute! I didn’t need a strip search.”

Jamie and I laughed, unable to control it, despite the fact that it was at Brianna’s expense.

“Go ahead, laugh – but what would you have done if I had called from a detention cell at Logan and told you Fiona’s gift put me on the no fly list?”

I tried to rein in my laughter.

“Sorry, lass,” Jamie finally was able to say, “Aye, that would have been…unfortunate,” he chortled.

“Arrgggh,” Brianna finally snarled, starting to stalk away.

“Bree, stop, please?” I asked of her. “We’re not laughing at you, just at the situation.”

She stopped, but did not turn.

“I know,” she flatly answered, keeping her back to us.

I wondered if it was the subject, more than anything else, that had upset Brianna. She was still sensitive when the topic of human sexuality was broached, and who could blame her?
“Don’t worry, sweetie, you made the right call. Fiona never should have asked you to carry them.”

Bree finally turned around, and looked up, her pink cheeks now sitting atop a smile.

“I think she may have just been having fun with me, knowing it would embarrass me. We were alone when she suggested it.”

“Well, I know she wouldn’t want to get you in trouble,” I offered.

Bree nodded quickly, tentatively rejoining us by the table.

“Och, lass, why don’t we make the supper – forget about this,” Jamie queried.

Bree nodded again, letting Jamie put an arm around her shoulder, and they set to making food.

~~~~~

Jamie was pumping Alex’s legs up and down, pulling one out straight while he pushed the opposite one close to his body, when I came back from the bathroom. I think Jamie sighed in relief at seeing me once more wearing my nightgown. I know he closed his eyes for a moment, and then picked Alex up from his back on the bed and leaned back as he placed our son on his chest. He kissed the top of Alex’s head. I had just fed the boy before going to change and take a final piss for the night, so Jamie had taken the opportunity to run him through the workout routine he had begun just days after Alex’s birth. Jamie had read every little thing about what he should do with Alex to promote health and strength – he already had plans in the works to make all of Alex’s food once the breast was not enough.

I leaned in and kissed Jamie, holding my gaze on him.

“You’ve always looked right with a baby in your arms,” I related.

He smiled at me.
“It’s always felt right, too,” he replied, “Jenny’s kids, and her kid’s kids – I’ve held my fair share of bairns,” he shook his head, “but none have felt so…overwhelming. I will never receive a gift as precious as this one – you… you have given us a miracle. I guess it goes to show you the pace of God’s time – I had to live an unnatural span to see it at work.”

“You know I would have stayed,” I reassured, placing my hand on Jamie’s shoulder.

He nodded up at me.

“I know, Sassenach, but you needed to go. We might have lost Brianna in the struggle had she been born into that time. Thinkin’ that you and our child were safe gave me hope – part of me survived, and would go on, even if I could not.”

Jamie’s face turned introspective, and I could tell he was back there in his mind, in the bosom of his original family – Jenny and Ian and all their progeny. I found myself back there as well. It had taken time, but Jenny had accepted me. When I left she must have thought the worst, that I’d either died or abandoned Jamie and them.

“What did you tell Jenny and Ian when I didn’t come back after Culloden?”

Jamie closed his eyes for a moment, looked at Alex on his chest and finally looked up at me.

“For a long, I told them nothing. I didn’t have the words, all I had was pain.”

Jamie turned the baby to his back and cradled him to the right side of his chest, inviting me into the curve of his left side and strapping me to him with his arm.

“But you eventually told them something?” I inquired, hoping I wasn’t prying into things he’d rather forget.

“Aye…I finally told them everything and let them think me mad. I needed them to know before…”

“Before?”
“Ian got sick. The redcoats kept imprisoning him, trying to ascertain my location and his loyalties. The conditions in prison were rife with disease. He contracted consumption.”

“Oh,” I sighed.

“Would ye have been able to do anything for him? As a healer?”

“Not in that time. They were just developing medicines to combat it near the end of world war two – antibiotics that could knock down the infection. I would have been useless to him,” I admitted.

“Aye,” Jamie nodded, “Well, once Ian was…close to the end…I told him and Jenny what had happened.”

~~~~~

American Colonies/Lallybroch, March 1778

I was reluctant to leave young Ian in the colonies in the middle of a war, but he had proven to be a resourceful scout, so I trusted that he would be able to take care of himself for a time. I did ask if he wished to come wi’ me, say goodbye to his father, but I could see in his eyes he wished to remember Ian as he last saw him. He’d already faced his fair share of death by then, and the news of a death, while jarring, was far less than if it was witnessed.

Jenny had sent another letter, saying she didna know if Ian would last until I returned to Scotland, but that she would truly appreciate the effort even if I were to arrive too late. She came just short of outright asking me to come, but the subtext was clear, she wanted me there. I was no great part of the battles – I’d been a part-time scout, translator in a few Indian affairs, but I wouldna be missed. I sent word to Philadelphia, to Fergus and Marsali, to let them know where I’d be, but it would be a weeks’ hard riding to reach them in person, and I could not spare the time. I was only a day from the nearest port. Young Ian rode with me, and took guardianship of my horse.

I paid the extra to have a private berth for my passage. With my sea-sickness, and its unorthodox cure, I preferred to have some space where no one looked on me as I either heaved up my guts or had a face full of needles.
I spent a good long time atop the hill looking down at Lallybroch. So much time had passed, but I would look the same as the day I left, well, almost. I had let my beard grow out again on the journey, so I might pass for an older man among the family. If I were to show up looking like I could be one of Jenny’s bairns, it would cast too many questions. But I knew time was of the essence, and that even one more night might see me getting there too late, so I made the last miles, and walked into the yard just before supper time.

Wee Jamie, who was far from wee now, knew me right off.

“Uncle?” he questioned, his arms opening to me.

“My Laird,” I said with a bow to the man who owned Lallybroch now, and then gave him a crushing hug.

“Mam and Da will be pleased ye made it in time. Da could use the comfort, and the knowing you’ll be here for Mam.”

I nodded.

“It’s good to be home, even in sad times,” I said to Jenny’s eldest.

He nodded in agreement.

“Aye…come in, we’ll set another place.”

~~~~~

Jenny got the rest of the family to defer their want to catch me up on every detail of their lives so I could have time with Ian, in case he’d just held on for my arrival. He was tucked up in his bed in the North room, having been propped up to take his meal. I cleared the tray off the bed. Most of his meal was untouched, but the look on his face said he preferred a whisky to fill the hole in his belly. I poured him a wee dram, only for him to give me the eye until I filled the glass, and another, and joined him.
“Jenny shouldna have asked you to come,” he criticized.

“Aye, she should have. There’s something I’d have you know, I’d have you both know, before it’s too late. Something I…didna have the words for until now, something I need you both to understand.”

Ian looked gaunt. It hurt my heart to know I was about to tell a dying man that I might never die, but it was a part of the truth I was about to reveal for the very first time.

“Before you tell me what ye must,” Ian stopped to cough, “tell me of my Ian. Is he well?”

I smiled.

“He’s…thriving.”

A hint of a smile came up on Ian’s face, and he nodded slightly.

“Should the war not get in the way, I believe he will marry soon.”

“Jenny will be thrilled…this war, have you chosen the right side of the fight?”

“Aye, I have. This time, history is on my side.”

“You sound so sure.”

“You’ll hear my reasons. It’s part of what I must tell you and Jenny…You’ll probably think me mad, but…sometimes truth is truly stranger than fiction.”

Ian looked at me with a puzzled look on his face, but we both had our heads turned as the door opened and Jenny came in.
“So, brother…” she began, trying to act as though nothing was wrong, but I saw the fear and sadness in her eyes.

I embraced her, and felt a single sob against my chest. Jenny lingered in my arms until she had put her emotions back in their box. She gave me a pained smile, and then took a seat on the foot of their bed. Ian reached out for her hand, that way I had seen him do many times, but this time I became choked up. They had had each other for so long, had become part of the same whole.

“Jamie says he has words that must be shared with us,” Ian relayed to Jenny.

They both turned their eyes to me.

“Well…um…where to start,” I hemmed and hawed. “I guess it started at Culloden…actually, it started the day I met Claire…”

I told them the parts they’d been missing about the three years leading up to Culloden. I’m not sure if they believed me about all of it.

“Is that why Claire told us to plant potatoes?” Jenny ventured.

“Aye,” I said with a nod, “and she did her damnedest to help me keep Culloden from coming, but come it did, with me not having a choice about it when it came to the side I was on. Our efforts to stop it only served to put us in the middle of it, and so…the day came. Claire would have gladly stood by my side, but…the most wonderful thing had happened in the midst of those dark days – Claire was with child again. I was sure I was going to die that day, but Claire had to live, had to go to a safe place to have our bairn. So I sent her back, back to her own time. I can only hope she survived the journey and that somewhere out there my child lives…”

I paused and gulped. Every feeling of the moment we parted surged through my body.

“But there’s more…” I spit out.

“More?” Jenny said incredulously, “What more can there be? Ye married a woman who’d not yet been born, with knowledge of the future, and you got a child on her you kept from us, who could be out there living in the future? If I hadn’t known Claire, seen her with my own eyes, known her to have knowledge no one could explain – why could ye not tell me? Claire was like a sister to me at
“She wanted to tell ye, that I know. She struggled mightily with the wall she had to keep between you – for your sake. She didna wish to burden you, nor did she want to drive a wedge in that friendship. But her secret will pale once I tell you mine.”

I poured whisky all around, and let Jenny and Ian drain their glasses before I related the next part, and drained my glass twice over for the courage to go on.

“At the time, I wasna sure what had actually transpired, but it has come into focus over these last years. It was no fantasy, nor fever – I did die at Culloden. I traded mortal wounds with Randall. He died; I was reborn. It has happened again since, when Laoghaire shot me, so I can be sure of its truth. I come to the surface of the mill stream, naked as a newborn, alive again, and I doona feel a day older than the day of my first death.”

“Och, come on, brother,” Jenny scoffed, “no way in hell are you only six and twenty – younger than me, aye, but younger than my bairns?”

Ian just stared at me, and for the first time ever, I saw envy in his eyes. Ian had every right to envy others, but I had never known it from him – not once. Jenny had brought him everything a man could want, and he had embraced that life.

“I’m still trying to figure if it’s a blessing or a curse. If it means I could someday find Claire again, meet our child, then it is a gift from God. But if it is simply to leave me behind, while all I hold dear…dies…”

I closed my eyes and looked down, my chin touching my chest. I felt Jenny’s hand on mine. I opened my eyes to see Ian reaching out his free hand as well. I reached out and took his hand. The envy was gone from his eyes. He understood the price in pain I was paying for the years I never expected to have, for my grieving, and my loneliness.

“He understood I would have traded a prolonged life for a normal lifespan wi’ you, Claire.”

Jenny had me shave the next morning, so she could look on my face, judge for herself what age I
looked. I became a bit of a curiosity to the family. My namesake asked what magic stream I fell into, and I laughed.

“Well, it wasna because of clean living,” I quipped back at the formerly ‘wee’ Jamie.

“No, no one could ever accuse you of that, uncle…You’ll be going back to the Colonies?” he asked.

“Aye, in a while.”

“Before ye go, you left an indelible mark on me and my brothers and sisters. I’d hope you might spend some time with our children, so they remember you fondly as well. They doona know you as flesh and bone, but they should.”

Ian lived five more days. We sat and drank and remembered the good times. When he tired, I’d take my turn regaling Jenny’s grandchildren with tales of war, French opulence, Indians and the Colonies, and LaDame Blanche. Jenny was a rock. She made it through Ian’s funeral and burial with only a few deep sighs from her aching heart.

“Was Jenny alright?” Claire asked.

“Aye. Life went on. There had been, increasingly, no place for her at Lallybroch. Her son was the laird, his wife, the lady, and plenty of hands to do the work. She wished to see the other Ian in her life, and she felt this was her only chance to do so, so when I set off, Jenny came with me.”

“Jenny left Lallybroch?” Claire immediately questioned.

“Aye, after not being more than a few day’s travel from the place for most of her life, Jenny decided it was time to see the world.”

“It’s hard to picture her anywhere else.”

“Aye, to be sure.”
Claire yawned quite prodigiously, put her head down against me, and fell asleep.

“I’ll tell you all about our adventures…another time, Sassenach,” I whispered.

I had Claire on one shoulder and Alex on the other. Bree peeked in on us and gave me a quick wave. I nodded upward in acknowledgement. I am a fortunate man to have found them again, and I know it. And right now, all I can think about are the last words Ian Murray spoke to me.

“She’s waiting for you, don’t give up.”

~~~~~
Naked Truths

Chapter Notes

I don't know who saw my comment of last week, but in case you missed it...I went over a week without a computer to use as a roofing cock-up led to it raining in the house - over my desk top and laptop computers and my sewing machine, though it might not have mattered because I almost lost my mind mopping straight through the night. Desktop computer survived - laptop had to have all software/operating system reinstalled, and we have yet to find out if the sewing machine lives. I was finally able to do the final tweaks for the new chapter over the last few days, and hope you enjoy it, because it contains one of my favorite scenes. I had a lot of filling in around established plot points to wrangle with. For those of you able to see the series, I'm sure you are knee deep in happiness, but I'm right now suffering from knowing a big episode for Roger and Bree aired over the weekend, and I will not be seeing it for months to come. I have to fill my brain with my own storyline, and I hope you're all willing to keep coming along with me.

Naked Truths

Before Bree knew it, almost a month had passed, and a nice peacefulness had descended on the household. No longer completely exhausted by the act of simply getting up and dressed for the day, Claire was finding her daily rhythms, including a morning stretch with Alex as her partner. Jamie was making the breakfast, finally able to trust that nothing catastrophic would happen because he left the room. Brianna felt comfortable, back-sliding into childhood a bit herself, letting things be done for her, and not being in charge.

“I think we better get Bree back to Scotland soon,” Claire told Jamie after breakfast.

Bree had gone shopping alone today because she had a few errands of her own to run and she wanted the freedom to stay out all day if it should happen.

“I could take her staying a bit longer,” Jamie mused.

“As could I. God knows she’s been invaluable, but...if she stays too much longer, I think she might be scared to again take up the life she was building.”

“Aye...she’s grown comfortable here, and there will always be a place for her with us, but she
needs to live her life…I’ll talk wi’ her. She’s scarcely spoken of Lallybroch since the bairn’s been here – been too busy wi’ us I dare say. Do you think we can do without her yet?"

“We’ll have to.”

~~~~~

I headed down to the media room to talk to Brianna. I in no way wanted to push Brianna away, make her think she was no longer needed, but she needed to go back to Scotland, finish what she started in restoring Lallybroch, and in taking control of her own life. She was putting items into her backpack as I came down the ramp.

“Is it a bad time?” I asked, seeing as how Bree seemed focused on her task.

Her head shot up, like I had caught her at something.

“Do you need me?” she asked, zipping a compartment shut and hauling her bag off the couch.

She placed her fingers in her pockets, and stood nervously beside the couch.

“Everything alright?” I asked.

“Yeah…just…putting a few things away…actually…I’m…packing.”

She stopped and looked at me, trying to read my face. She looked worried, like she thought it might hurt me.

“I was only meant to be here for a week or so, but I can stay longer if you need me to.”

I opened my arms and walked quickly up to her, wrapping her tight.
“You’ve done more than I ever could have asked,” I hummed in her ear.

She melted against me.

“You have been a rock for your mam and me.”

I pushed her back to arm’s length and smiled into her sad eyes.

“We needed you, and you were here, but…”

“You’ve got this now, I know,” Bree answered for me. “And I need to get back to Scotland.”

“Aye, lass, you do, but I’ll miss you.”

“Me too,” she managed to squeak out as she started to cry.

“It’s alright, lass, it’s alright. I’ve got ye.”

She cried in my arms more than Alex had since we brought him home, and I held tight to her. When her tears subsided, she released a deep sigh and whimpered slightly.

“Alright now, lass?”

She nodded against my neck.

“Have you made your travel plans?”

“Not yet.”
“Good, it gives us time for a proper goodbye. Perhaps one more movie night?” I probed, wondering if she wanted to stay or if she was wanting to be off sooner.

“What movie?” she said with a humorous tint.

“Whatever you want, lass. And perchance you’d let me cook a grand meal before you go? I’ve not talked to your mam about it, but it’s unlikely you’ll be comin’ back to Boston for your and your mam’s birthdays, so maybe we could move up the date, celebrate while we’re together.”

“Um…” Bree gulped as she pulled her head off my shoulder.

“Mom won’t celebrate early – says it bad luck, but I don’t think she’d object to a bit of a send-off…I’m not leaving too soon, am I?” she inquired in a worried tone.

“Nah, we’re settling in, your mam’s getting stronger, and I’m…not so scared now – besides, you have places to be, and people to boss around.”

Brianna smiled back at my smile, and nodded.

“I wonder how things have progressed at Lallybroch without you,” I mused aloud.

“Me too,” Bree replied, her brows furrowing in thought for a moment, and then coming back to the smile she had been wearing.

Brianna tucked her head into the crook of my neck and clung to me a bit longer. I was glad she was thinking about leaving of her own accord, that it was not completely her mam and me who saw the need for her to return to Scotland, but I would miss her something fierce, and so absorbed as much of her presence as I could.

~~~~~

Rather than watch something new, it was decided the family would watch The Princess Bride yet again.
“Alex needs to see this movie,” Brianna counseled. “You have to show it to him – a lot.”

Jamie nodded, reaching out for Bree’s hand. I remembered, out of the dim mists of the past, Brianna sending me off to work with the words “have fun stormin’ the castle” on numerous occasions, and I smiled until my cheeks hurt, and I shared that memory. Bree smiled, but also fought off tears. That was such a different life – just Bree and me against the world. I thought by now to be an empty-nester, filling my time by throwing myself into my work. How much more pleasantly it had worked out.

All was fine until we reached the scene with the shrieking eels. Apparently that particular pitch hit Alex’s eardrums like a sonic disruption, and he cried and fussed in Jamie’s arms.

“Hand him over. I know how to quiet him,” I told Jamie, loosening my top.

Bree leaned back into the cushions as far as she could as Jamie passed Alex in front of Brianna to me. She was still quite scared by the thought of even touching her baby brother. Alex took to the breast without question, and Jamie pulled Brianna in tight to fill the void in his arms.

Several times, I caught Brianna watching Alex as he nursed, but I could not tell what thoughts it was evoking in her. Was she remembering what it was like to be a nursing baby, or thinking about what it might be like to be the one doing the nursing? Was she fascinated, disgusted? Something drew her to look, but I doubt I will ever know what.

Alex was back asleep after drinking his fill, but Brianna made it almost to the end of the movie before falling asleep on Jamie’s chest.

“They’re never too old to fall asleep in our arms,” I whispered to Jamie.

~~~~~

It was Bree’s last night with us. She’d been here in Boston with us for a solid month – all of August, and we had needed her every minute of this month. She had unknowingly walked into a powder keg and had stamped out the fuse. Jamie had gone shopping today, but told Brianna she should stay with me, take some time together. Alex was down for a nap on the far side of the bed, so I hoped to have a few minutes with my girl that Alex would not interrupt. Bree was still my baby, after all, and I was about to let her go again. She reluctantly sat on the bed, only inches from
her brother, pulling her left knee up so she could face me more directly. She glanced at him nervously.

“Is there anything you need?” I asked, diverting her gaze from Alex to me.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that question?” Bree asked back.

“I’ve got everything, thanks to you and your level head,” I complimented, “You got us through, you got Jamie through. You have been so good for him, and he for you,” I said, reaching my hand out to hold Bree’s chin.

“I feel the same way I did when I left the last time – ambivalent. I want to go. I need to get back to Lallybroch, but…Are you really ready?” Bree asked, nodding.

“Ready or not, it’s time. Jamie is going to be an amazing father…he already is, actually. The way he’s been with you, the patience, the understanding.”

I smiled thinking about how Jamie slowly forged a bond with Brianna, seeming to know just what to say and do, after a notably rocky start. I breathed a sigh.

“This autumn is going to be so different. It’s the first time we won’t be together for our birthdays, and I’ll have to find something else to do for Thanksgiving – do you think you might…come to Boston for Christmas?”

Bree looked down.

“I don’t know – you know Fee will want me to spend Christmas with the MacKenzies to make up for not staying last year. I guess it also depends on how well the work has gone along without me.”

“Of course,” I acquiesced.

Bree cocked her head.
“Dad’s home,” she announced.

“Go, see what he’s brought.”

Bree nearly skipped out of the room. I had unknowingly raised a daddy’s girl. Amazing, since she had not had a ‘daddy’ until a little over a year ago. But she lucked out, and got the best father ever.

~~~~~~

Dad seemed to be hiding a bag from sight as I came into the kitchen.

“Can I help?” I asked.

Dad turned and beamed a bright smile at me. He planted a kiss on my forehead.

“Not this time, Lass. I want to do this *for* you – my farewell gift. You go back and be wi’ your mam. I’ll call ye both when it’s time.”

“You’re sure?...I…enjoy cooking with you. It’s…the first place I felt comfortable with you.”

“Och, I remember, lass. That first time we made bannocks – that’s when I knew for sure we’d be able to have a proper relationship. Let me do this?” he asked, almost pleading with his eyes.

I nodded.

“Sure.”

“We’ll have a nice meal, perhaps one more movie…”

“And then?” I questioned the soft ending to his words.
“A surprise,” he stated, his face hardening into the inscrutable mask that gave nothing away.

“OK, I know that look. I’ll be patient.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and gave him a tight hug. I always feel like a little kid when I hug him like that.

“Do your worst,” I chortled in his ear.

I could feel my father’s smile against my cheek.

“Off you go now,” he said in all seriousness, and escorted me to the edge of the kitchen, standing with his hands on his hips until I turned and headed back to the ground floor bedroom where mom and Alex were resting.

~~~~~

“I offered to help, but…Mom?”

“Behind the door,” I called out, “At the changing table.”

I saw Bree peek around the door as I turned back to look.

“Darn…Bree, sweetie, I need another pack of diapers. Could you? They’re just over in the corner.”

She made her way to the warehouse sized pile of packages we’d stacked in the corner of the room.

“What size?” she asked, seeing as how I was gifted with enough sizes to see Alex through his first year, although not enough of each one, I was sure.
“There should be at least one package labeled ‘newborn’, I’ve found they’re extra soft – and they have a spot for the umbilical so it doesn’t rub him raw.”

“Oh…Aha – found it – them, actually. You still have three labeled ‘newborn’.”

“Open it up and bring me one,” I instructed.

With a task to perform, Brianna almost forgot she’d find a baby with me at the changing table, and looked a bit taken aback as she swung the door and saw Alex splayed out as I wiped him clean. Or so I thought, until her prolonged staring prompted a question I never expected.

“Is that normal?” she asked, looking at Alex.

“For a male newborn, it’s perfectly normal, I’m told – I’ve seldom looked at this end of things in my career, and you’re the only other baby I’ve dealt with so…personally.”

“So it’s different for an adult?”

I smiled inwardly. Bree was exhibiting healthy curiosity about male genitalia, albeit shyly, and I needed to tread carefully lest I shut her down.

“The short answer is, yes, adult males are a bit different…Should you ever encounter a naked man with purple testicles, you should refer him for medical care, immediately.”

A smile crept up my face, and Brianna blushingly returned my smile and nodded. Indirect question answered directly.

“Not that I’m likely to face that choice,” Brianna red-facedly retorted, clearly rendering an image in her mind.

“Unless it’s a windy day in a crowd full of kilts!” I couldn’t help but blurt out.

We both laughed until Alex started to cry.
“Hush, now,” I soothed.

I took a fresh wipe and cleaned Alex once more.

“There you go, all we need is that diaper.”

“Oh, right,” Bree uttered, handing it to me. “I thought dirty diapers were nastier than that.”

“Not yet. Once he’s on solid foods – that’s when I’ll need the full gas mask experience, but for now, it’s just about keeping his skin clean and dry.”

Bree and I talked until Jamie called us for dinner. Nothing risqué, or even remotely deep was discussed, but Brianna did let Alex curl his hand around her finger for a moment. I wanted to encourage her to pick him up, feel what it was to hold him, but I knew it would merely trigger her resistance. The simple touch they shared would have to do.

~~~~~

Dinner was like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and our birthdays all rolled into one. Jamie had almost perfectly rendered the roast pork dinner we’d had at Andrew’s house in Wales. Crisp bits of onion clung to the fat cap on the meat, and the little potatoes were perfectly browned. Knowing I could not drink because I was nursing, Jamie presented us with a sparkling blush grape juice that tickled my tongue, and complemented the meal as if it were a fine wine.

The pocket doors to the dining room were pushed fully into their sidings, and we ate in elegant opulence to bid Brianna adieu once more. Alex slept through his first fancy dinner. It was wonderful, but as it neared completion, a pall of sadness began to fall over me. Brianna was leaving again – fledging once more from her parental nest, back to the nest she was constructing. Jamie reached out and placed his hand over mine on the table, reading my thoughts, knowing I needed comforting.

We lingered, long after all our bellies were full. No one wanted to be the first one to push away from the table.
“You did a great job, Dad,” Brianna commented, the stemmed glass from which we were drinking our sparkling juice cradled, as if to toast Jamie for his efforts.

Jamie beamed back at her, delighted to have her approval.

“You mentioned a surprise?” she also asked.

“A surprise? What kind of surprise?” I asked, turning from Bree to Jamie.

“Aye, but we’ve stuffed ourselves so well, there’s nary room for a crumb more.”

“So it’s a food surprise!” Bree brightly exclaimed. “Another cake Broch Tuarach?”

“Nothing so grand, but there is chocolate involved. Something to soothe our souls as we must again be parted from ye,” Jamie almost whispered as he leaned in close to Brianna.

Bree squeezed her eyes shut to fight back her tears, but her eyes were moist anyway, and she had to come loose of her chair to give Jamie the hug she wanted to.

“I love you,” she whispered in his ear.

Jamie rose to his feet and pulled her even closer. It was all I could do to retain my composure, but I did just that, until Bree came around the table and held me and said, “I love you, too.”

~~~

I actually do not remember what we watched once we’d made our way down to the media room. All I could think about was that Brianna was leaving. By the silence in the room, I think it was what we all were thinking about. Jamie had taken all the burdens from me, holding both Brianna to his shoulder, and Alex in the crook of his arm, but it left me feeling isolated, so I slid in behind the elbow Alex was cradled in, and found a small piece of Jamie’s shoulder unused that I could snuggle against. We clung to each other as if we would freeze if we were separated, a lump of humanity with shared sadness, the couch our life raft.
When the program ended, we began to leave the couch, pulling apart like sections of an orange. I took Alex to see if he needed to be changed, and was pleasantly surprised that he still felt dry, but in doing so, I woke him, and his appetite. I let him suckle on my finger until I got upstairs while I watched Jamie and Brianna head up arm in arm. It was beautiful to watch them together.

Jamie’s “surprise” turned out to be chocolate cupcakes. We each had one, still quite stuffed by Jamie’s impressive dinner, but wanting to share this while we were all still there to do so.

“I’ll take ye to the airport,” I heard Jamie saying to Bree.

“No…if I don’t say goodbye here, I might not be able to leave you, besides, it wouldn’t be fair to mom, and I can’t cry two times. We’ll have breakfast – together – and then I’ll go. My flight leaves late in the afternoon, so I’ll have plenty of time to get through security. You need to stay here – all of you.”

Jamie nodded and pulled Bree into his hip.

“Mo nighean ruaidh,” Jamie purred as he continued to nod.

“Always,” Bree answered him.

~~~~~

Morning came way too quickly, and not just because my sleep was broken when I needed to feed Alex. I’m not sure, but I think Jamie got up in the night. I have a vague recollection of reaching my hand out to the other side of the bed and finding nothing but cool sheets and abandoned pillows. I don’t think Alex was fussing enough to make Jamie walk him, but I would not be surprised if Jamie was restless, and went to stand over Brianna one last evening. It will very likely be close to a year before we’re physically with Brianna again, unless, of course, she does come to Boston for Christmas, but she made that sound unlikely.

It became all too real that Brianna was actually leaving when I saw her backpack leaned against the wall near the doorway to the foyer. I sucked in a breath when I saw it standing there.
“You OK, Mom?” Bree asked, hearing me.

I nodded, but my smile was unconvincing. Bree opened her arms to me and squeezed me tight.

“You and Dad will be so busy with Alex…”

“Don’t you dare say we won’t have time to think about you,” I admonished.

“I wouldn’t presume,” Bree replied, “I’ll call, I’ll Skype, I’ll IM – I’ll send dad picture updates – you will hear from me all the time – I’ll make sure Fiona nags me twice a week, so I couldn’t possibly forget.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jamie offered, coming over with Alex.

I took our baby so Jamie could give Bree a good hug. They were so close now. It pained my heart to see them saying good bye. It wasn’t even going to be the last good bye. We still had a breakfast to get through.

~~~~~~

The tears were still flowing from all of us as Bree walked out of sight of the house. I saw Jamie’s lips roll into his mouth as he held back an all-out collapse. He quickly took Alex from my arms and held him tight, breathing deeply to control his emotions. His breaths deepened and slowed as he inhaled the scent of newborn. I came up behind Jamie and put my splayed hand on his back, rubbing it side to side slowly. He looked up from nestling Alex and tried to smile at me, but merely conveyed the deep pain he was feeling over Brianna’s departure.

~~~~~~

There had been enough of a tailwind that Brianna’s flight back to Scotland was ahead of schedule. Instead of calling Roger to pick her up, she decided to pay for the cab for her ride back to Lallybroch. While on her way, Bree called to tell Roger and Fiona she’d landed safely, and early, and that she’d opted for the taxi. Next she called Lallybroch, but there was no answer.
Bree drowsed slightly as the ride progressed. She was jet-lagged as well genuinely worn out from meeting her new brother, and dealing with her parents. She was especially emotionally exhausted from the new level of love and understanding she had found with Jamie, and from how careful she felt she had to be around Alex.

“We’re there, lass,” her driver verbally cajoled her awake.

“Oh,” she hummed drowsily, “Right…how much do I owe you?”

After settling her fare, and the driver helping her unload her suitcases, she found herself surrounded by bags, but completely alone in the yard. She saw Wake’s truck, but the place looked deserted. Bree would have carted all her bags along had she not been in great need of the bathroom just now. With just her carry-on in tow, Brianna stepped lively into the house, slipping the shoulder strap of her bag off as she quickly moved up the stairs. As she reached for the door to the bathroom, the knob turned and pulled away from her. Wake stepped into the hall, steam radiating from his body. Brianna jumped back, startled by his sudden appearance. As the steam cloud abated, she realized Wake was completely naked. They both stood frozen to the floor. A wide-mouthed Brianna scanned him from the feet up, unable to look away. She gulped as they made eye contact.

“You’re back early,” he spoke, setting his shoulders back.

He had no intentions of skulking away, a small part of his mind figuring the universe thought turnabout was fair play. He’d seen her naked, after all, so this leveled the playing field. Brianna looked absolutely rattled. Wake took another step out into the hall.

“Excuse me,” she exhaled, brushing past him, rushing into the bathroom and locking the door quickly. Wake smirked and shook his head.

“And welcome home to you,” he mumbled to himself, heading up to the bedroom he was using to get dressed after his shower.

Wake had the kettle for tea ready by the time Brianna was bold enough to come downstairs. She peered cautiously around the corner into the kitchen, still looking rattled. After all, seeing a man naked was not an everyday occurrence for Brianna Fraser, and Wake MacKenzie was something to see.

“Feeling better?” he asked. “Now that you’ve used the facilities?”
“Oh. Yeah,” she nervously reported.

“I guess we can call it even, then…in terms of seeing each other naked.”

Brianna blushed and cast her eyes down.

“I didn’t mean to…I mean…my plane was early.”

Brianna was completely off her game, and unable to erase the image of his body that kept popping up in her mind’s eyes. During her time away from Lallybroch, she’d only thought of Wake sparingly, and rarely while she was fully awake, but now her mind was full of him. And it did seem absence had made her heart grow fonder of him.

He could see she was struggling with their encounter in the hall, and was hoping to put her at ease by making light of the whole situation, but in light of his growing feelings for her, he wasn’t sure how to proceed.

“So, you’re a big sister now,” he affirmed.

Bree brought her head up and smiled.

“Yes – mom had a little boy.”

“All’s well?” he asked.

Bree nodded as she let out a held deep breath. Wake turned back toward the counter and prepared two cups adeptly. Handing one to Brianna, he signaled her to sit at the table, and he joined her, putting his free hand on a file folder that was sitting there.

“I’ve kept track of everything that happened while you were away,” he bantered, patting his hand on the manila.
“Any problems?” she asked, feeling on more comfortable ground.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle after you had them all scared straight.”

She gave Wake an incredulous glare.

“And that’s the look that did it, I surmise,” he teased.

“I just didn’t want anyone taking advantage while I was away – like moving in when they were only to watch the house,” she accused.

“Ah, well, that was not intentional, I assure you.”

“Really?” she said with renewed pinkness in her cheeks and a sparkle in her eyes.

She looked away to take a drink from her mug.

“I was here late – working, I swear. Everything had gone wrong all day. I was covered in mortar, nearly couldn’t open my mouth, it was nearly dark, and all I wanted was to crawl back to my flat. I got in the truck, and the engine wouldn’a turn over – not a peep. I’d had had it for the day, felt the key in my pocket, and crashed out in the front room for the night.”

Bree was smiling at him, beginning to laugh slightly.

“You don’t believe me?” he accused.

“I believe what you’ve told me so far, but I don’t believe it explains this afternoon.”

“Ah, well, no it doesn’t, but the next morning I woke and showered and got several hours of good work in before another soul showed up for the day, and I figured, what with takin’ over your duties, and with the truck DOA – that’s dead on its axles - it might pay off in the long run if I were to just stay here, and take advantage of the extra hours.”
Brianna nodded gently and took another sip.

“I’ll have the tower done ahead of schedule, and the stone for the fireplaces has been delivered – I had them bring it right into the house to acclimatize.”

“Is that important?” she asked.

“Vital. Damp stones can wreak havoc.”

Bree smiled, unexpectedly delighted by the Scottish tones of his words.

“Well,” he looked at her then down again. “I guess I should be going…the truck’s fixed, and now you’re back, so…”

“Thank-you…for taking care of the place while I was away, even if your methods were a bit unorthodox,” she smirked.

“Aye, well, you’re welcome. And doona be afraid to call on me should a need arise again.”

They both detected a subtext to his words, but neither was ready to call the other on it.

~~~~~

Brianna smiled in her sleep and released a pleasurable hum as she rolled onto her back. A sigh came loose of her as her back arched under the covers. The weight of the blankets caressed her skin, feeding into the dream that was filling Bree’s mind and senses. With a sudden start, Brianna cried out and sat bolt upright. As she panted for breath, she pulled a pillow from behind herself and hugged it tight.

“Oh, Wake,” she gasped.
She hadn’t had a dream quite this unsettling since the ‘side effects’ that had haunted her the days following her resurrection. Even the dream she had the night Alex was born hadn’t felt so real, so…stimulating. The green scanning eyes had surveyed her body, and every inch of her was throbbing.

Bree leaned down sideways, pillow still in her embrace, and whimpered.

“Just when I thought I’d gotten you out of my system.”

A quiet tear rolled down her cheek.

~~~~

Brianna had hardly slept, partly because of the flight and time difference from Boston, partly because of the dreams fueled by her unexpected encounter with the naked Wake upon her return to Scotland. She was already on her third cup of coffee, and it had seemingly done no good to get her up and going for the day. She heard a knock.

“Bree?” she heard Wake call.

“Come in,” she called followed by a sighing/moaning/mooing sound emanating from her as she held her head.

“You look like hell,” Wake burred, holding a smile off his lips.

“I’m still on Boston time,” she grumbled, “and the economy class seat on a plane is not meant for someone my size. I’m knotted in places I didn’t know I had places.”

Bree began to rub the base of her neck, grimacing at the movement it took. Her hand tensed up when she felt Wake take over the rubbing of her neck.

“Oh,” she sighed, her hands dropping to her sides like dead weight.
His thumbs pressed exactly where she needed the relief, and his palms were warm, soothing the tight muscles wherever they touched. He worked his way out her shoulders and she slumped back in the chair, leaning her head back against his stomach. He stepped closer, only the back of the chair keeping him from engulfing her in his arms and turning her and kissing her with the same force he was using to massage her. Bree’s breathing was becoming a little ragged as the heat from Wake’s hands seemed to be collecting elsewhere.

She let out an audible breath and shook loose from his touch as she stood.

“Thank-you,” she whispered breathlessly, “It feels much better now.”

She screwed a smile on her face and turned to look at Wake. He saw the curious mix of fear and desire on her face as he took her hands into his. They stood there, frozen, so close to kissing, but some unseen force keeping them just separated. And then the moment between them ended. Brianna turned away and headed to the sink with her coffee cup, having to grab the counter’s edge because she was shaking like a leaf.

After getting herself back into control, she turned and leaned her backside against the counter.

“Was there something you needed?” she finally asked.

“There was…but I seem to have forgotten what it was for the moment. I’m sure it will come back to me.” He nodded, trying to think how to extract himself. “I’ll let you know…I’m sure it will come to me…so…until then.”

Wake got out of the house, and was damn glad there was no one around to see the look on his face.

~~~~

As soon as the last worker left Lallybroch, Bree decided to call it a day. She’d watched Wake drive out of sight and let out a deep breath, relieved that he was more than walking distance away, at least for the night. Still feeling out of sorts after returning to Scotland, Bree thought a hot shower and early bedtime might help. As the water soothed her muscles, however, she couldn’t help but think about Wake’s hands on her neck and shoulders. And that quickly segued into the image in her mind of his naked body as he stood in the hall.
“Dammit,” she cursed, “this is more than some side effect…OK…I have to admit it – at least to myself. I don’t know if it’s love, but…I want Wake.”

At first, the admission made her angry, wondering what was his power over her. If only their first meeting had been different – he’d had an advantage over her right from the start. Sometimes watching him work, Bree felt like a desperate fan girl watching her favorite celebrity. The sheer distance alone making him unattainable. And at other times, when he was close, and when they were talking and laughing together, it felt like there was no distance at all, and at any moment it might explode into uncontrolled passion.

Brianna had finished her shower and was tucked in her bed when she came to a decision. Enough was enough – she needed to know for real if Wake MacKenzie was as interested in her as she was in him. The next time an opportunity arose, she would make her move. She was ready to put her heart, and body, on the line.

~~~~~
So, I’ve survived another birthday, and am gnashing my knuckles over not being able to see the most recent episode (sorry if you disagree but I love myself some #RogerandBree in the series, even if my story precludes their having a romantic relationship), but I have managed to fill in another set of the blanks between some long written scenes, and oddly enough, we are closing in on Christmas 2016 in this chapter (although not quite there - next chapter). But there is one rather explosive scene in the next chapter that effects who will be doing what over the holidays - one of the scenes I wrote several years ago as a foundation for the story framework, talk about thinking ahead!! But before I get you too excited for a chapter yet to be, I guess I better let you read this one...

Jamie placed Alex on the center of the changing table, keeping gentle pressure on him to foil any escape attempts. With two quick rips of the re-sealable tabs holding his diaper on, Jamie had the boy uncovered. He stood admiring the perfect little body, lost in the joy of this brand new child. From behind the bedroom door, Claire heard Jamie exclaim, “Mac na Galla!” She smiled broadly.

“Did you forget to duck again?” she loudly called out.

“Ifrinn. I doona think ducking would have been a good idea, or I woulda had a mouth full,” he called back.

A minute later, Jamie came back to the bed cradling Alex in the crook of one arm as his hand was well ensconced around the boy’s head.

“And that’s not a drink of which I wish to partake,” he concluded.

“Here we go,” he said more softly, handing Alex to Claire. “Now he’s got room for the next meal.”
Bree was about to drive into Inverness, still trying to decide if she was going shopping to restock her supplies, or if she was just going to pick up something ready to eat. Bree had finally had time to unpack, and wrap her mind around the unexpected welcome Wake had provided her with, leaving her to think about how she would let her feelings be known. Lallybroch was beginning to feel like home again, even if a good portion of her heart was still in Boston. She’d called her mom and dad, told them she’d arrived safe, but left out the detail of being greeted by a naked man.

Her phone rang.

“Bree, dear, come to dinner. There canna be anything…nutritious left after a month’s time – nor have you had time to shop yet - come…let me feed ye…I’ve made cake,” Fiona toned sweetly, “Chocolate.”

“Um…” Bree hummed, momentarily scared at the thought of crossing paths with Wake now that she’d set her sights on him, but her stomach demanded she pay attention to just how hungry she really was, and how good a warm meal would feel.

“OK…I’ll be there soon.”

~~~~~~

“Wren, so glad you came,” Roger welcomed Brianna with a hug and a peck on the cheek.

“Bree,” Fiona breathed out as she hugged her as well, “So good to see you. Do you have any more pictures of that new brother of yours?”

“More pictures? I didn’t know there were any pictures.”

“Och, your mam sent the most beautiful snaps of Alex sleeping on Jamie’s chest, but it’s been weeks now since anything new came in.”

“Probably because she didn’t want dad to know. He’s been…very protective of them both.”
“And no doubt of you as well,” Roger added.

Bree nodded.

“Hey, mam, what we havin’?” Wake queried as he came into the house and up the hall to the kitchen.

Brianna tensed up, not knowing he would be there. She looked over her shoulder at him, but quickly looked away, her heart pounding. Roger looked from Bree to Wake and back again, getting the sense that something had changed. The dynamic between Wake and Bree was different.

“Has Wake had the chance to bring you up to speed on the goings-on at Lallybroch?” Roger asked, wondering if it was just the time apart that had caused their ill-at-ease reactions.

“Yes, we’ve…re-familiarized ourselves,” Bree offered.

“Aye,” Wake confirmed, moving past Brianna and trying to sneak a bite of whatever Fiona still had cooking on the stove.

When Fiona ushered him past the stove, he still managed a quick finger-full of frosting off the side of the cake that had lured Brianna to the manse.

“Och, you’ll get the piece you marred. The rest of us are due an untouched section of cake!”

He smirked, but moved quickly, pulling a chair out for Brianna.

“Boss?” he presented.

Bree nodded and slipped in front of the chair, waiting for Wake to set it close enough to the table for her to sit. Her pinkie finger brushed across his knuckles, and it took a bit for Wake to let go of the arms of the chair, her touch tingling his flesh. As he lingered, Bree looked up at him over her shoulder and shyly smiled. Roger was now sure something had changed between the pair, but whether it was a positive or negative change, he was not sure.
During the rest of the meal, Wake and Brianna exchanged glances, though mostly when the other one was not looking, and at the end of the night the rest of the cake went home with Brianna. Wake even held the door for her as she left laden down with leftovers.

He was about to breeze away himself when Roger called him back.

“Wake? May I have a moment afore you leave?”

Wake nodded and headed back into the kitchen, taking a seat. There was a moment of quiet while Roger made sure he heard Brianna’s transport pull away, all the time switching back and forth like a cat with a cornered mouse.

~~~~~

“Bree seemed fine until you showed up here tonight, Wake. Has somethin’ happened?” Roger asked.

Roger and Fiona stood over their seated son, both with an accusing glare focused on him.

“Och – it was…fate getting even,” Wake began to explain.

“What was?” Roger grilled.

“She…walked in on me…comin’ out of the shower,” Wake exhaled heavily, looking down.

“So…she saw the whole kit and caboodle, did she?” Roger asked with a tilt of his head.

“Aye,” Wake replied, slowly looking up, and smirking just the slightest bit so only his father could see it.

“I told ye, I told ye staying at Lallybroch once ye didna need to any longer would lead to trouble.
Were you trying to tempt fate? Did you want her to catch you like that?” Fiona alleged.

“Och, no.”

“But you didna mind, did you? You’ve never been shy about your body. I could hardly keep clothes on ye when you were a lad. Poor Bree – how many traumas must she endure?” Fiona lamented.

Wake’s quietly bemused look turned to one of concern.

“Traumas?” he questioned.

“Never you mind,” Fiona warned.

Wake felt a chill from his mother he’d seldom experienced, but shook it off as so much hyperbole.

“We’ll be fine. She’ll likely have put it out of mind by morning,” Wake assured his parents.

There was a moment of silence among them, and Wake set to leave, Roger following him down the hall. Roger reached out and clamped a hand on Wake’s shoulder.

“It’s been three days. She’d have already put it out of her mind if it was going,” Roger related, his look conveying a stern warning.

Wake nodded his agreement.

“I know, da. I’ll tread lightly.”

~~~~~

For the next week, Bree kept looking for opportunities to be alone with Wake, but was being
thwarted at every turn. If he was outside, there were people about, and she didn’t want to be so obvious as to walk all the way up to the tower. When he came inside, she found herself keeping a distance, afraid she’d actually be alone with him. A wave of bravery overtook Brianna as she saw him head into the study, and she followed him, determined that she’d follow through this time. She made a quick turn into the room, about to call out him name, march up to him and plant her lips on his - Bree sucked in a breath and stopped short – Wake was not alone.

“You OK, Bree?” Wake asked.

“Um, yeah – sorry to interrupt, I’ll come back.”

She made the journey to the bathroom tucked in the corner of the kitchen on very shaky legs. She felt nauseous from what she almost did. She sat on the toilet lid and put her head between her knees.

“Why can’t I do this? Why can’t I find him alone when I have the nerve?”

She stood and looked into the mirror. Her cheeks were blazing red. Bree brought up the hot water in the sink and wet the hand towel that had been hanging next to the sink, covering her face with it and breathing in the warm steam. The normal color returned to her face as the steam subsided. She sighed in relief, and went back out to face the world, feeling a bit diminished by what she perceived as another failure in her quest to know Wake’s heart.

~~~~~

An unexpected cold snap came to Lallybroch, slowing much of the work, and stopping Wake’s outdoor stone work in its tracks. The yard was riddled with frost heaves and icy patches, and it was the first real test of the heating system at Lallybroch. Just in case, Bree also broke out her Winter gear, making sure her gloves, hat and scarf were at hand. Bree was sure she would find herself alone in the house with Wake at some point, and was imagining where and how far things would go if she warmed him up with a kiss.

Wake began sorting through the pallets of stone for the fireplaces, sorting them by color and roughness, and assigning them to the different rooms. There was less physical work for Brianna to take part in, so she shifted her attention to documenting the progress to send the pictures home for Jamie to peruse. Each morning Brianna psyched herself up for the possibility of an encounter with Wake that would change everything about their relationship. And at the end of each day, she was slightly more disgusted with herself because she couldn’t go through with it.
“It’s hard to believe it’s already been six weeks,” Claire acknowledged as Jamie picked the boy off his chest and handed him over to Claire for his breakfast.

“We should be on our way to the appointment early. I don’t want to keep Janet waiting,” Claire continued as Alex heartily nursed from her left breast.

Jamie nodded, still watching his son nurse with acute fascination. Claire smiled, enjoying the way Jamie looked at both of them engaged in this most natural of experiences. Alex was single minded in his task, clinging tightly so Claire only need hold him with one hand. She reached out to Jamie and held his chin.

“You can have your turn next if you like,” Claire purred.

Jamie shook his head and looked down.

“Nah.”

“I have plenty, and I’m sure Alex wouldn’t mind sharing.”

Jamie took Claire’s hand off his chin and held it.

“Jamie, while being a mother might be my priority right now, I’m still a woman. Desire does not go away because I have a baby at my breast, in fact, it reminds me how an intimate touch can bring forth… feelings.”

Claire drew his hand to her unoccupied breast. Jamie’s eyes lit for a moment, but then he drew inside himself, a look of worry adorning his face.

“I’ll get started on the breastfast…I mean, breakfast,” Jamie nervously corrected, withdrawing his hand, and his person from the room.
“Looks like I’ll have to work a little harder to get your Da over the Madonna complex,” Claire expressed to Alex, then pursed her lips. She switched the suckling to the other breast, and let him finish his ‘breastfast’.

~~~~~

The hospital had been my second home for many years. This was the longest I’d been away from this place since I came to work here. Entering this building as a doctor has a different feel than entering it as a patient. Part of me wanted to show off Alex to the nurses and other personnel I had worked with all these years, but Jamie just wanted to get the appointment over with, and get us all home again. Jamie is still afraid something will go wrong, that the doctors will find something either with me or Alex that could threaten our survival.

~~~~~

“Claire,” Dr. MacInnes greeted, her arms wide open, “So good to see you.”

The pair of doctors hugged.

“Jamie,” she greeted with a nod.

“Aye…doctor…I mean Janet,” he finally said, remembering that Claire had said to address her that way.

“You’ll get used to it,” Janet told him as she nodded.

He shook his head subtly, thinking that name belonged to his sister and one of his nieces.

“So you’ve survived the first six weeks.”

“We have,” Claire asserted.
Without another word, Claire got herself positioned for the exam she knew was coming.

“So, no complications?...no unexpected effects?” the doctor asked as she flipped a few pages on her clipboard.

“My fatigue was a bit more than I remembered with Brianna, but then I realized, I was much younger when I had her, but I feel like I’ve bounced back pretty well. And I’ve had lots of help.”

Claire reached out her hand to Jamie, engaging him, keeping his mind focused on her smile and appreciation, while she was examined.

“Everything has healed nicely, Claire. That prompts the question about resuming sexual relations.”

Jamie’s eyes bulged and his mouth wrinkled as the shock and lack of comfort registered on his face. He wrapped his hand around Alex’s head, as if blocking his ears, turning his back on the two doctors.

“Seas,” Jamie hissed in Gaelic.

“I’m assuming you don’t want to get pregnant again right away, so you have a few option when it comes to birth control –“

“No hormones,” Claire interjected.

“Well, that does take several options off the table. You could go the exclusive breastfeeding route – 98% effective, but since you were already in peri-menopause, or very close to it anyway, you might not know when that window is up, which leaves barrier methods.”

“O mo thruaigh,” Jamie again expressed in Gaelic. “Gu leoir. Does this not seem more a conversation for a kittle-hoosie than a doctor’s office?”

“Jamie, these are very appropriate conversations for this doctor’s office. Would you rather take Alex out in the hall until we’re done?”
“Aye,” he nodded, his face drawn. “All this talk of swiving in front of the boy.”

Jamie headed for the door as Claire and Janet quietly snickered and smirked at each other.

“So, I can get you fitted with a diaphragm before you leave today, or there’s always condoms.”

Claire slipped something out of her pocket and handed it to Janet.

“A friend of mine sent about a year’s supply of these – read it,” she advised, with a growing smirk.

Dr. MacInnes turned her hand palm side up and looked at what Claire had handed her.

“Lock Ness Monster condoms – don’t be messy, use a Nessy. You have interesting friends, Claire – will your husband use them?”

“After what he went through during this pregnancy, I’m going have trouble getting him to have sex with me again, but if I can assure him these will likely prevent a pregnancy, he will use them.”

“So he’s not chomping at the bit?”

“Not yet, but I haven’t really felt the urge much yet either.”

Janet nodded in understanding.

“Do you want to get Alex’s first check-up out of the way today too?”

“Is anyone available without an appointment?”

“Dr. Adler is here.”
“Perfect,” Claire replied.

Claire caught up with Jamie in the hall, bringing along the car seat that Jamie had left behind in his rapid retreat from the exam room.

“Jamie,” she spoke gently, not wanting to startle him. He turned.

“When were just having a very frank – I mean honest conversation. Funny how you thought it was funny when it was Brianna’s discomfort over the topic.”

“That was among family.”

“She’s like family to me,” Claire advocated on behalf of Janet MacInnes.

“Aye, perhaps, but I barely know the lass.”

“Jamie, there’s a reason Janet and I hit it off so well. We think alike. She’s been my confidant, my friend, my sounding-board for more than a decade. She’s getting the pediatrician for Alex’s first check-up. Dr. Adler is wonderful – most babies take to him right away.”

“Dr. Fraser?” a calm voice addressed.

“Dr. Adler, this is my husband Jamie, and our son, Alex,” Claire introduced.

“Very good to meet you,” he said to Jamie, and then leaned in to look in Alex’s face, “and you, Alex.”
There was no need for Dr. Adler to bend to look in Alex’s face as he didn’t quite come up to Jamie’s shoulder, and was very close to face to face with the boy where he clung to Jamie’s chest.

“Shall we go to an exam room?”

We headed down the hall, Dr. Adler in the lead, and me bringing up the rear to ensure that Jamie didn’t veer off with Alex.

“May I?” the doctor asked, reaching out to take Alex from Jamie.

I nodded or else I’m not sure Jamie would have relinquished the baby into his arms. Dr. Adler placed Alex on the exam table on his back, always keeping a hand on him. He maneuvered the stethoscope into his ears and began listening, checking the heart, the lungs. He smiled and nodded, once again wrapping the tubing around his neck. He took stock of Alex’s body, running his hands down arms and legs.

“Excellent muscle tone.”

“We work out together,” Jamie proudly told him.

“Good…good…may I remove the diaper?”

“Of course,” I answered quickly as I watched Jamie’s shoulders tense.

“I see you haven’t circumcised yet, there’s still time to get that done.”

“NO!” Jamie loudly protested, moving in, closing the diaper and covering his son, taking him back into his arms.
“There are a number of reasons – “

“No,” Jamie repeated firmly.

“Doctor, we’ve had this discussion. Jamie isn’t…” Jamie glared at me.

“Jamie can teach him what he needs to know,” I informed the doctor.

“Ahh, very well – but it is more of the norm these days to have the procedure done, and not just among the observant.”

I smiled.

“We know, but I trust him on this.”

Dr. Adler nodded in subservience.

“As you wish. I didn’t have a choice in it, and, frankly, it’s one ceremony I’m glad I don’t remember…Oh, before you go today, let’s set up Alex’s vaccination schedule – at two, four and six months there’s HepB, DTAp, PCV13, Hib, Polio, and RV, and a flu shot at six months as well.”

Claire sighed and nodded.

“Jamie will need all the shots as well to be safe.”

“Aye, there’s no proof of what I’ve had, and I wilna put the boy at risk,” Jamie elucidated.

“I’m sure if we looked into it - ”

“No,” Jamie said firmly, “Anyone who would have access to that information, would disavow my
“Military?” Dr. Adler whispered, then placed his hand over his mouth as if he’d said too much.

~~~~~

Putting the bow on a good day, Alex smiled for the first time. He looked up into Jamie’s eyes, and smiled. Even better than that, I captured that moment in a picture, and sent it to Fiona. Jamie was so enamored by Alex smiling. I was looking forward to next few weeks of milestones as Alex became increasingly aware of his surroundings – all the little stages of development Jamie hadn’t been able to see Brianna go through. And I was sure I would find myself thinking back to those days with Bree, and knowing just how much Jamie would have enjoyed them.

~~~~~

It was colder than Bree thought it should be, even under all the covers. She poked a hand out, but withdrew it immediately.

“Damn.”

The house Brianna and her mother lived in outside of Boston did this all the time, so she recognized the symptoms right away – a probable power outage, or heating system malfunction. One way to know which one…Bree braved the cold once more and turned the knob on the lamp on her bedside table. Nothing. Luckily, a full moon shone in the window, and in every window on that side of the house. She knew she had both candles and a flashlight – downstairs.

“No sense in dawdling,” she mumbled.

With a quick move, Bree slipped into her UGG-style slipper/boots and grabbed her outdoor sweatshirt, beginning to stand as she pulled it over her back. Her hat, scarf and gloves were draped on the heating vent and had luckily dried. Bree now bundled up, she headed downstairs, hugging the wall in the low light. She found her flashlight – ironically sitting on the old kitchen hearth, like it was waiting for her. She smiled as she shined the light around and found a beautifully stacked, ready to light collection of wood and starter materials. When Wake had done this, Bree didn’t know, but it had to have been him. A warm tingle went through her body as she thought about him.
A small box of matches made the decision for Bree. The little hint of flame worked its way up through, spreading outward until a nice tower of light and heat was flickering away. Bree breathed a sigh of relief as the warmth spread to her, allowing her to shed the gloves, hat and scarf, scattering them about. She sat, literally half-assed on the hearth, one cheek and leg planted firmly across the opening as the other leg dangled into her new livingroom.

She stared into the fire, turning more and more to face it, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them until her eyelids drifted shut, and she reveled in the warmth until she almost rolled forward, nearly pitching headlong into the fire. That startled her awake.

“That would not have been good,” she murmured.

Brianna noticed that the hearth was wide enough if she turned and lay across the opening on her side. Before doing so, Bree gathered herself up in a blanket off a nearby chair and settled in by the fire. The crackling and dancing of the flames working to mesmerize Brianna, and the warmth sinking into her bones soon had the young Fraser sighing and drifting off.

~~~~~

Wake arrived before everyone else in the morning, and used his key to let himself in. He called out, “Bree?” once before he spotted her on the hearth. He noticed the fire he’d laid so meticulously had been burnt. For a moment he was upset, but then a smile overtook him.

“As long as you enjoyed it, Goddess,” he murmured as he stared at the statuesque sleeping form in front of a bed of embers.

He reached for her, but hesitated. This was the second time he’d gotten to see her sleeping.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, wishing he could stare at her for hours.

He knew the rest of the workers would be arriving soon, so despite the want to ogle her at length, instead he bent in low to her ear and lightly gripped her just below the shoulder.

“Good morning…boss.”
She rolled to her back, just keeping her purchase on the hearth, her blanket unwrapping and cascading to the floor, exposing her bare midriff where her shirt had slipped up a few inches. A sleepy, goofy grin spread across her face.

“Has the power come back on?” she asked as she stretched her arms over her head, taking her shirt several inches higher.

Wake didn’t answer right away, struck by how, even in sweats, Bree had a form that left him distracted at the least and breathless at the most.

“Aye? The power was out?” he alerted, eyes widening.

Bree slowly sat.

“Yeah. In the middle of the night it was so cold and dark. I came down to find my flashlight, and saw the fire laid out, so I figured this was one of the fireplaces that was safe to use – I guess I was right!”

“Aye, the old kitchen hearth needed almost nothing done to it – just had to line the flue – it stayed in use more than most. I guess it kept it in working order.”

“I guess – “

“But, why did you not call when you found the power out – I’d have come straight away – “

“And done what? Really, I was in no danger. The way you set up the wood was beautiful as well as functional, so I took advantage of it.”

“Och, well…” Wake bent his head down as a broad smirk filled his face. He shoved the fingertips of both hands into the tops of his pockets and he fought off the fluttering feeling in his chest. Everything about her was unassuming perfection, in his mind anyway. If he looked carefully at her pinkie finger, he was sure he’d see himself tightly wrapped around it. They heard another truck pull into the yard.
“You best get ready for the day. The men are startin’ to filter in.” Bree smiled and nodded.

She picked up the fallen blanket and handed it to Wake, their wrists touching as she got the blanket into his hand.

“Toss that back on the couch, could you?”

This would have been the perfect chance to throw herself at Wake, if only others weren’t already coming. She ambled past, come hither visage taking shape, Wake turning to watch her leave. God, how he wanted to follow her.

~~~~~~

Alex could now hold his own head up, and that meant Jamie could add a few more exercises to their repertoire. He would take hold of Alex’s hands and pull him to a sitting position, and then slowly lower him down to his back. Jamie would rock in and out, almost coming nose to nose with Alex at the apogee of each pull-up. Alex often cooed as Jamie’s face came so near. He also started teaching Alex to reach for things. He’d place him on his stomach and place Sawny just beyond reach. The first few times, Alex only looked in fascination at the coiled creature, and made a seemingly questioning sound of “gah?”

Alex was alert on a whole new level, observing us as much as we were observing him. He often reached out to my lips when I spoke to him, like he was trying to feel the words, take them in his hand and mold them to fit his own mouth. There was something new each and every day. Jamie and I both began reading aloud to Alex, and not just children’s books. Jamie even read him the weekly grocery circulars as he went through them to plan his weekly shopping. I think it very likely Alex’s first word will be ‘broccoli’ or some other cruciferous vegetable, but it is a genuine heartwarming pleasure to listen to Jamie make up voices to represent each different department of the grocery store.

Alex tolerated his first round of vaccinations, as did Jamie, for that matter, Jamie getting full doses of the inoculations while Alex got the first of three or four mini doses of his first six preventatives. I don’t know what was more painful – hearing Alex let out a cry, or seeing the look on Jamie’s face when he did.

~~~~~~
After a multitude of false starts and lost nerve, Brianna Fraser was angry with herself. She’d vowed to herself to find out the state of Wake’s feelings, but as of yet had been unable to take the bold step needed. It was her birthday this coming week, and she found herself thinking about one year ago – the first birthday she had had a father in her life. She felt a pang of guilt – Jamie had been proud of her boldness, always complimented her for standing her ground, but she couldn’t see herself in that description just now. It made Brianna wonder – was she afraid Wake wouldn’t want her – or that he would?

“This is different,” she assured herself.

Wake’s green eyes popped into her mind, and the feel of his rough yet gentle hands were massaging her thoughts.

“Last year, I got a dad for my birthday, this year…this year, it’s good thing that dad isn’t here, or I’d never even consider what I have in mind. I know what I want for my birthday…Wake.”
Je suis prest, I think…

Chapter Notes

10 points to whoever knows the name of the actor/director I reference near the end of the chapter!! (someone I adore, to be sure) Again, the main events of this chapter were some of the earliest penned scenes I wrote, and I've been holding them for years at this point, so I'm rather anxious as to how they will be received. I'd say enjoy, but, some of this is going to hurt...

Je suis prest, I think…

Bree spent the whole week leading to her birthday making plans – luckily her birthday fell on a Friday this year, and she could think of no better scenario than seducing Wake Friday evening, and keeping him through the weekend. She had set in her mind that she would not be scared off this time.

The night before her birthday, Brianna had an impromptu spa session. She shaved her legs and her armpits, and her private regions. She took a long shower, shampooing her hair twice. Bree used her Aveeno lavender infused lotion that left her skin so smooth that at times she found it irresistable to run her hands over her own body. Thinking about Wake running his hands up the length of her legs, she shivered with delight, knowing the electricity his touch was capable of sparking.

She went to bed that night feeling calm, confident, and ready for her planned assignation with Wake. Her body tingled with excitement, and her dreams were very pleasant, indeed.

Brianna rose early, nervous energy not allowing her to linger in bed. She’d even planned what she was going to wear today, wanting it to be something Wake could easily get her out of, but that didn’t look out of place for the day, and that didn’t telegraph her intentions. Loose fitting jeans and a flannel plaid shirt that didn’t even need to be unbuttoned to strip her of it, and underwear that would all but disappear with a flick of her wrist were donned. She could barely contain the excitement her body was starting to feel. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and put on a pair of slip-on boots. If Wake was going to have her, she wasn’t going to leave any roadblocks in his way. She was absolutely giddy as she headed downstairs for an early breakfast.

~~~~

“Happy birthday morning, Bree,” Claire joyously announced as her daughter picked up her phone
as she sat nursing a coffee whose caffeine she really didn’t need today.

“Mom.”

There was a hint of a sigh in Brianna’s voice that her mother immediately detected.

“Everything alright?” Claire asked in return.

“This is the first time we’ve been apart for our birthdays,” Bree confessed.

“I know, sweetie. I’ve been thinking about it the last few days. Please tell me you won’t be alone for your birthday?”

“I have plans.”

“Good. I know we were rather set in our celebratory ways, but sometimes it’s good to strike out and do something new.”

“That’s what I was hoping,” Brianna said, trying not to let her mother hear the slight gulp she made.

“Gah-ah,” came through the phone from Boston.

“Mom?”

“Sorry, it’s Alex…”

“He’s talking already?”

“Vocalizing – no words yet.”
“Isn’t that kinda fast?”

“Jamie and I have been reading to him, and talking to him – babies pick up a lot at this age. You were an early talker – you should ask Fiona about it. She and Roger taught you Scottish slang words whenever I left you with them.”

“I wish I remembered – it would come in handy now,” Bree said with a smile. “Oh, did Dad get the new pictures I sent?”

“Yes, he’s printed a number of them out. It’s hard to believe you made the old kitchen hearth such a beautiful centerpiece of the living room. You’ve been using the fireplaces, then? I saw ash…”

“Um, yeah, there was a power outage a few nights back. Wake had laid the fire at some point, so I lit it and it kept me warm until the morning. Better than when the heat went out in our old house.”

“Sometimes the previous generations did things better,” Claire averred.

“I miss you, Mom,” Brianna relayed, her voice sounding strained.

“Bree, leannain,” Jamie’s voice burled into the phone.

“Dad?”

“Aye. I’ve sent a little something for your birthday. It should arrive in the next day or so. And I’ve told Roger to gi’ ye a hug, from me, if you doona mind.”

“I don’t mind.” “Good.”

“Dad?”

“Yes?”
“I love you.”

“Och, just the thought warms my heart. Enjoy your birthday, lass.”

“I’ll try, but it won’t be the same.”

“Bye Bree,” Claire said as Jamie handed the phone back.

“Bye,” Brianna offered, both deflated and buoyed by the conversation.

~~~~~

Brianna was wide-eyed when Wake first arrived for their morning meeting, wondering how she might maneuver Wake into being here after everyone else had left for the day. But fate was on her side.

“I’m gonna try to get in some extra time on the tower since we’ve had this fortunate turn in the weather,” Wake told her, referring to the sudden heat wave that followed the brutal cold snap just over a week before. “I keep losing time on that tower, and that’s the main reason you hired me on.”

“That’s not the only reason,” Brianna disagreed.

“Aye, but it is one of my reasons for takin’ the job. I’ve always wanted to do a total restoration on a broch, I mean, I’ve worked as an apprentice on a number of them, but, this one…this one is all me, and I want to do it right.”

Bree smiled shyly.

“I wouldn’t want anyone else doing the job – would you like me to help today?” Bree volunteered.

“Nah, you’re dressed too pretty today,” he teased with the tilt of his head.
Bree looked at him, puzzled look on her face.

“Doona worry, you’ll get your hands on the broch again before I’m done, just not today – I’ve hit a bit of a snag, and need to concentrate to puzzled it out.”

Wake smiled broadly, and Bree couldn’t help but reciprocate. She wanted to grab him right then, but he was off before Bree could manage to move toward him. She sucked in a deep breath as she heard him close the door, and released it slowly, a passion relief valve, letting her ardor cool until later.

~~~~~

Around noontime, there was a knock on the door.

“Brianna Fraser?” the man outside asked.

“Yes?”

“Delivery for you – sign here,” he said, extending the electronic clipboard.

Bree scrawled her name as best as the attached stylus would allow, and had to back out of the doorway for the item to be wheeled in on a dolly.

“Where do you want it?”

“I wish I knew what it was, um, I guess…bring it into the living room – follow me.”

Bree led the delivery person around into the living room and smiled and nodded politely, pointing to the hearth.

“Up here, I guess. It looks like I’m going to need a crowbar to open it. What did you send,
Dad?...thank-you,” she addressed to the delivery man.

He nodded and headed out of the house. Bree closely investigated the packing, realizing she’d need to get a drill/driver to open it up. She sought out one of the men in the yard and borrowed his drill and a kit of bits so she could match it to the type of screw used. With four screeching removals, she had the screws out and dislodged the cover from her package. A sheet of heavy paper had suctioned to the back of the lid and flew to the floor. Bree picked it up, but didn’t recognize the hand of the message.

“Dear Brianna, your father requested that I have this sent to Lallybroch to commemorate the day of your birth. Enclosed you will find a portrait of Ellen MacKenzie Fraser, your grandmother, and quite the spit of you too. Best wishes, and happy birthday, my dear girl,

Andrew Rhys-Jones,

Your ardent admirer.”

Bree smiled, remembering how sweet he’d been to her, and how she had felt empowered in his presence to be bold. It was exactly the reinforcement she needed for her plans for Wake tonight.

Brianna pulled a protective cover off the painting and gasped at the likeness between her and Ellen. She could also see Jamie in the woman’s face.

“Wow,” was all she could say as she took in all the wonderful details of the painting – the tilt of her head, the style of her hair, the subdued smile that hinted she knew something you did not.

“Hello, gram. Have you come to visit, or stay?” she asked the portrait. “Until I know where you’re going, I should probably put your lid back on for safe keeping…and not light a fire until you aren’t sitting on the hearth.”

Bree re-swathed the painting and pressed the lid back in place to protect it. She’d have to talk to Jamie about where it should hang, but this was not the time. The workers would be gone the moment it turned time and it would start getting dark an hour or so after that. Somewhere in that window of time, Wake would come down to the yard, and Bree wanted to be waiting for him. In the meantime, Bree needed to keep lookout for Wake. She decided to wash up a few dishes, and scan the horizon for Wake, hoping it wouldn’t already be dark out when he stopped work for the night.

~~~~~
Brianna looked out her kitchen window and saw Wake walking down from where the tower sat. He was dusty and splotched with mortar dots. Her breath caught in her chest as she watched him strip off his shirt and toss it into the back of his truck. He was headed around the side of the house to let the outside shower pour over him. Brianna had found the large wet spots in the yard several times. She grabbed a large, fluffy towel and draped it around her neck, and headed out the door.

She’d tried to keep her distance from Wake, but he was so damn charming. For months she told herself anything she felt for Wake was just a side effect of coming back to life, but it had been nearly a year, and she had been away from him for several long spans without it lessening her feelings. If anything, she was more interested and drawn to Wake than during their first, inauspicious meeting.

She stood back as he shook the water from his hair like a wet dog. His bangs hung just over his eyes, obscuring Brianna’s approach until she was just steps away. His head snapped up on the same spring as his arms and he grabbed her at the elbows defensively.

“What are you doing?” he snapped before recognition set in.

Bree was caught off guard by his brusque manner and tried to step back. That only tightened his grip on her arms, and pulled her closer as she had not had time to set her feet. Her breathing was rapid, adrenaline coursing through her body. Wake realized it was Brianna, but rather than ease tensions, that realization pushed him over the edge, and he kissed her, backing her into the wall of the house as he did. When they hit the wall, his arms dropped around her back, freeing her arms. She grabbed the ends of the towel and looped it over his head, using it to keep him pulled into their kiss. Bree clung to him, pressing herself as tight to him as she could, pulling him in, urging him to keep going. Her right leg slid up his leg, hooking around Wake’s hip. In response, he pinned her pelvis to the wall with his, driving hard against her. She sighed at the feel of such close contact, and further wrapped her leg around him. Her body was singing, and her hands started searching for the button on his jeans. The woman who’d been beguiling him from their first meeting was succumbing to his touch, and seeking to touch him. He could have her right then, right there, but then a thought came to him – what if she’d never? It hadn’t occurred to him until just this moment. With all her confidence, and commanding presence, Wake had forgotten she was considerably younger than he was. He wouldn’t take advantage of her possible naivety. He pulled his lips free of hers.

“What have ye done this before?” Wake solicited.

“Of course I have,” Bree confirmed, trying to resume their kiss. Her tone didn’t leave him convinced, and he bored his eyes into hers until she looked down.
“I have…once.”

A chill walked down her spine at the revelation. Wake shook her gently by the hips until she looked up again. His look was demanding total honesty.

“When I was sixteen…and it was awful.”

“Oh, lass…we canna do this,” he bemoaned, looking down and shaking his head.

He put the towel back around Brianna’s neck, grabbed her knee to unfurl the leg wrapped around him, and pushed her firmly away, pressing her back to the wall, and he briskly walked to his truck. He’d been gone almost fifteen minutes before she came out of the shock of him just leaving her there without another word.

~~~~~

Claire looked misty–eyed as she sat in their bed nursing Alex.

“Is he hurting you?” Jamie asked.

“No…I was just thinking about Bree, having her birthday without me, and me having mine without her.”

“It’s no that late there, you could call her again,” Jamie offered.

“She has plans. I don’t want to put a crimp in her night – she’s off having a good time – she deserves it.”

“Aye…So…what can I do to make your birthday a happy occasion, short of bringing your daughter to ye?”

Claire smiled sheepishly and laughed deep in her chest.
“You know what I want, but from the moment I made any insinuations in that direction, you’ve been using Alex as a buffer. I want you, Jamie,” she told him, reaching out and placing her hand on his chest.

He shied from her touch.

“See, that’s what I mean. You pull back every time I suggest sex. It’s very unlikely I’d get pregnant right now, and if we use Fiona’s gift, it becomes an infinitesimal chance. We just need someplace safe for Alex to be while we do it – and I love that he’s sleeping on your chest, but occasionally, it would be nice if we could put him down for a nap, and just be lovers for a while.”

“Och, Sassenach, you’re going to make me say the words, aren’t you…I’m scairt. I didna consider the consequences of my actions when I found ye again – I just wanted ye too much, and I could have lost you. If we’d taken…precautions…”

“We wouldn’t have Alex, for one, and for all you went through while I was pregnant, would you honestly say you’d rather not have this child?”

“No –I…” he reached back, putting one hand on Alex’s back and one hand on Claire’s shoulder.

“I…he is the most…amazing gift, but if we had lost him, or I lost you…I kept my hope alive all these years with the thought that I would someday find you. Had I fulfilled that dream, only to lose you again – forever this time – through my own carelessness…”

“Jamie, if I had been planning how our life together went, I doubt I would have imagined getting pregnant within weeks of finding you again, but I also never imagined finding you again. I know the emotional scars that formed the fears you have. We can’t avoid them all, but we can minimize this risk. The fact that I got pregnant at this age was, well, not unprecedented, but I would have been willing to lay a large bet it was not going to happen, that I was past those years. If we’re careful over the next couple of years, I will reach a point where I can guarantee we won’t have to worry anymore, but in the meantime…” Claire grabbed Jamie’s shirt just below the collar and pulled him in close, “I need you; I need your hands on my body: I need the wonderful warm feeling I get when I feel you inside me. Can you give me that?” Claire implored.

Claire released him, and he sat leaned in close to her for a moment, his mind working. He spun and stood, walking briskly over to the bureau and pulling ‘his’ drawer out. He flipped it upside down to empty it and carried the empty drawer to the space on the floor right next to his side of the bed.
“What are you doing?” Claire asked as her mouth began to hang open in disbelief.

“You said the boy needed some place safe to be,” Jamie quipped, his eyes flashing with excitement.

Claire smiled and blushed, quite pleased, if a bit surprised by his sudden shift in attitude.

“I trust you, Sassenach. But I truly doona know if I would survive you being pregnant again, so you best be right about how small the risk is.”

Alex had fallen asleep at her breast, and while they were deeply involved in this conversation, Claire had not switched breasts halfway through this time. She tried to rouse the boy.

“Alex,” she toned, “…He’s sound asleep,” she whispered, “And I have a problem,” she sighed looking down at the still engorged breast the baby hadn’t used this time.

Jamie took the baby from her, and gently placed him on his back in the empty drawer. He smiled, but didn’t seem to mind his new bed one bit.

“Perhaps I can work my way up to what you want, Sassenach,” he purred, moving in on the breast that was clearly starting to pain her.

As Jamie engulfed her nipple, Claire’s head slowly tilted back, relief and desire ravaging her body.

“Ummmm,” Jamie hummed, “You ate cucumbers recently,” he observed, and resumed drinking from her.

Claire smiled, relaxing into the pillows as Jamie’s other hand cupped the currently smaller breast. Jamie didn’t stop until her breasts were equal.

“That was a good start,” Claire whispered, pulling his lips to hers.
“Aye…where did you put Fiona’s gift?” Jamie asked with a renewed glint in his eyes.

Claire reached to her bedside table and pulled open the drawer. She had emptied the entire box of condoms into the drawer, resulting in them being piled more than an inch deep.

“I thought it best to keep them close at hand, just in case,” Claire remarked.

Jamie nodded, but his eyes switched to a rather introspective gaze.

“Touch me – make me feel desirable.”

“You have been desirable from the day we met, Sassenach,” Jamie said with a sigh.

Claire took his head into her embrace, knowing he wasn’t quite ready yet, but just having him press his body to hers felt amazing. Claire thought about a day – not the day they’d met, but the first time she’d let down her guard with him, tending the gunshot wound when they first reached Leoch. His desire for her had been unexpected, and in her state of mind, unwelcome, but as she thought about it now, had been a very honest reaction to having a woman sobbing in his lap.

“Just hold me for now,” Claire requested.

~~~~~

Brianna finally made it into the house. She was barely able to breathe, and she felt completely numb. She couldn’t fathom what had just happened. One second Wake was all over her, the next, she was standing alone. She felt nauseous and dizzy, and as if someone had just punched her in the stomach. She all but crawled up the stairs and poured herself into her bed.

She looked off into space so long, her unblinking eyes went dry.

Sleep didn’t come no matter how long she lay there.

She sat up in the middle of her bed, drew her knees up tight, and wrapped her arms around them,
and began rocking to and fro.

She had never felt so alone. She couldn’t tell her mom or dad without admitting what she had planned. She couldn’t talk to Fiona or Roger because it was their son who’d left her feeling like this, and right now, she couldn’t talk to anybody because she couldn’t wrap her mind around what had, or more specifically, what hadn’t happened. All the giddy anticipation of the previous twenty-four hours had collapsed into a shattering silence - her own private hell.

~~~~~

After a weekend of absolute misery, barely eating or sleeping, Bree thought it couldn’t get any worse, but come Monday, there he was. They were polite, but awkward with each other after Wake’s abrupt Friday departure, and the morning meeting was absolute torture. Brianna’s heart still pounded when he first appeared each day, but she was afraid to make any move on him after such a shutdown. She wondered if he’d stopped because she was inexperienced or because she wasn’t a virgin, or maybe the whole thing from the beginning had been in her mind, and he was just a polite, solicitous man, and she’d been misreading him from the start. Whatever the truth might be, Brianna ached for him, and found herself near tears more times than she could count.

Brianna was in the yard Tuesday morning when his truck slowed to a halt. She started to turn away, but damned herself and faced him. Her attempt at a steely gaze came off as absolute anguish from where Wake was looking.

“Oh, God,” he said under his breath without moving his lips for her to see. He wanted to pound his head against the truck.

He pasted the most neutral expression on his face as he could and stood at the side of the back of the truck.

“Hey,” Brianna addressed him, sounding subdued and a bit sad.

It was the first non-construction word she’d spoken to him since the debacle.

“Hey,” he replied with a nervous nod. “Um… I should have the tower all squared away in a week or so, weather permitting.”
Brianna nodded back. “Good.”

She found herself scanning the contents of his truck while she searched for something nonchalant to talk about. She noted several mesh bags stuffed to the gills sitting there, out of place.

“Laundry?” Bree asked, figuring it was a safe topic.

“Oh, aye. The machines in my building are out of service, so I’m trolling for a launderette.”

“I could take care of that,” Brianna offered, wanting something to do to keep herself occupied while he was about.

“Probably shouldn’t – my laundry is the reason the buildings machines are down.”

“I had an industrial washer installed when I upgraded the appliances. I thought living out here I might need it.”

Wake broke into a smile for a moment, but remembered the strain in their relationship, and drew his lips back down.

“I don’t want to impose,” he said with a dip of his head.

“I don’t mind,” Brianna told him, reaching for the bags.

His hand projected quickly to take hold of the drawstrings on the bags, but only came up with Brianna’s hands. It was an electric touch for both of them, causing each to flinch and let go. Brianna looked at him. She wanted to cry again, but the very thought made her angry, and her eyes shot daggers.

“I’m doin’ your damn laundry,” she burst, grabbing the bags and walking off, one bag in each tightly held fist.

She got to the house and got the door closed just before the tears overwhelmed her. She tossed each
bag violently up the hall, following them and kicking them, taking out her passions on the only thing of Wake’s she had access to – his dirty clothes.

“I hate you,” she spewed, kicking one of the bags yet again. “Why?...why do you – gah! – why did I let myself think of you as anything but just another sub on the job?”

Wake could hear Bree’s muffled voice cursing him, and he hung his head.

“Damn.”

~~~~~

Wake came up behind Fiona in her kitchen and bent down to kiss her on the top of her head.

“Hello, mam,” he said softly.

“Wake, ye sound like you’re lost your best friend.”

Wake sighed and tucked his fingertips into his jeans pockets. He looked down and closed his eyes.

“Oh, no, not a friend, a lass. I didn’t know you were seeing anyone just now.”

“I’m not, really…it’s just…You know I’ve been rebuilding the tower at Lallybroch…”

“Och, Brianna Fraser.”

Wake looked wide eyed and agape at his mother, at a loss for words.

“Don’t let the flies in,” she advised, pushing his chin up to close his mouth.
“You two have been playing tag with each other since the day you met, and your eyes have not stopped sparkling whenever you remember that meeting.”

“Aye, well, I may have put an end to it before it began to be anything other than a notion. I did something stupid, and compounded it by trying to fix it. Now I’ve angered the lass, and I don’t know if it can be undone.”

“I think the question you must ask yourself is whether Brianna is truly angry with you, or if she’s lashing out because she feels hurt by what you’ve done…what did you do, by the way?”

Wake glared at his mother, unsure how much to divulge after being warned off so many times by his parents and Jem.

“She…made her interest known, and I…I was…afraid to follow my heart…She’s so young, you see? I didna realize, for she’s so…forthright. But then I remembered her age…her inexperience…”

His volume trailed off and he turned to look away from his mother.

“I’ve known the lass her whole life – as have you, might I add. She’s always been mature for her age – at times too much so.”

Fiona reached up to place her hand on Wake’s back.

“You know her well enough by now, Wake. You’ve been infatuated with her for almost a year, and while I probably shouldn’t say, I know for a fact she’s been struggling with her feelings for you just as long.”

He turned his head quickly, Fiona nodding at his dreamy grin. He turned the rest of the way around and slowly revolved downward into one of the chairs around the table. He landed so heavily the chair moaned under him.

“Come, now, you can’t have been blind to it?” she asked.

“I thought maybe…but…she always pulled back, until the last time…and then I did.”
Fiona ruffled her fingers through her son’s hair.

“If you think she’s the one, don’t let her get away…Follow your heart.”

~~~~~

Brianna’s amazement grew by the second as she emptied Wake’s laundry bags.

“How in hell did he get so much wedged into these bags?” she spoke, shaking her head.

Despite her anger toward him right now, Bree decided she might as well do the laundry anyway. If nothing else, should the acrimony between them continue, she could at the very least toss the heavy bags at him, and try to inflict damage, signaling an end to the relationship that never was.

Trying her best to divide the clothing along color lines, the piles on the laundry room floor grew knee deep. Navy, tan, dark brown, green, off-white, and a few one-offs in colors she didn’t have names for sat surrounding her. For a moment, Bree considered bleaching the lot of it and giving him back the pastel versions of everything he owned, but she thought better of it, realizing that was a childish reaction to a very adult pain she was feeling.

“Six fucking loads? Has he not done his wash this year?” She said, beseeching the gods of laundry to be kind.

“At least I have a warranty if Wake breaks my washer,” she mumbled, wishing the same had been true for her heart.

While the first load of Wake’s laundry worked its way through the wash cycle, Bree decided to check her messages, emails, and social media accounts. In the days since Wake had pushed her away, Brianna hadn’t felt like corresponding with anyone. She’d replied to her mom and dad’s texts and voicemails just to keep them from asking if anything was wrong, but she’d been ignoring all else. Although not feeling social, Bree logged into her Facebook account and found a friend request waiting for her. It brought a smile to her face, and lifted the fog from her brain as the last few days were blotted out by happier thoughts.

She accepted the request and sent a simple one word message.
“TINK!”

She was surprised when not ten minutes later she got a reply.

“Hey, Pan, long time no see. I was going through some old pix and found a whole memory stick of just the two of us. Remember that Christmas? Still one of the best ones I’ve ever had. Tell your mom Hi from me! Talk soon I hope.”

After a flurry of messages back and forth, and half the night gone by, Brianna had caught up with her best friend from kindergarten to the end of middle school, David Johansson. He had been the Tinkerbelle to her Peter Pan, in a gender-bending role reversal that raised several eyebrows, but few could argue with the casting of nearly six foot tall Brianna as Peter Pan and barely over five foot tall David as ‘Tink’, so shortened as to appease those who disliked the idea of a boy playing ‘Tinkerbelle’.

They were thick as thieves growing up, Bree having stood up to a bully who was tormenting the diminutive David in the first week of their school careers. David helped bring Brianna out of her shell, and in later years, got her to try out for the school musicals. But when they went to different high schools, they lost touch, their lives taking drastically divergent paths.

~~~~~

It was Claire’s birthday, and Brianna was in a quandary. She was afraid she’d break down and tell her mom everything, but she had to call. She needed to hear her mom’s voice, she just didn’t want her mom to hear the pain in her voice.

Brianna made the call, and closed her eyes as it rang.

“Hello,” Claire brightly greeted.

The sound of her mother’s voice calmed Bree.

“Happy Birthday to you,” Bree sang out, thinking that singing could mask the true timbre of her voice.
“Bree, you’ve been crying.” Claire replied to her.

Hearing that made Brianna actually cry again.

“I…I have,” she said in a teary voice. “I…miss the way things were, that’s all.”

“Oh, Bree, I do wish we could celebrate together this year. So much has changed, there’s so much to celebrate about. Alex rolled over this morning, all on his own – almost a month earlier than most of the treatises I’ve read say it will happen. I know all babies are on their own timetable, and I went through it all with you, but you forget how momentous each thing feels…So, did your birthday plans go well?”

“It was different,” Bree gulped out. “Mom, I’ve got to get back to work now. I just wanted to make sure you know how much I appreciate you, and what you’ve done for me. I love you.”

Bree hung up abruptly and switched her phone to voicemail before Claire could try to call back. She sat there trying to control her breathing, to stop her crying, and steel herself for another stoic day of trying not to feel anything.

~~~~~

After one more torturous morning meeting with Wake, Brianna plucked up the courage to make an executive decision.

“I don’t think we need to keep having a daily meeting. Things are pretty well in control right now, so for now, if I need to discuss anything with you, I’ll come find you. Maybe you can finally get the tower done.”

Bree said all this with her back to Wake, not looking at him once. Wake stood just off her shoulder next to the drawing table. He put his hand down next to hers, and she could feel the warmth of his body. She curled her open hand into a fist and drew it away from him, directly in front of herself, closing her eyes, and willing him to leave.

“Whatsoever you think is best,” he finally composed himself enough to say, clearly shocked, but
understanding why she was doing it.

Once she was alone in the study, she sucked in a breath and let out a slight whimper. Brianna felt like she had just cut off an arm. They had worked so closely together, but now, being near him was just too painful.

~~~~~

Jamie had spent the days between Brianna’s birthday and Claire’s birthday, working his way up to actually having sex with Claire again. Each foray into intimacy lasted a bit longer, and went a bit farther. His hands had run over every inch of her body, and his lips had covered nearly as much territory. Alex was getting comfortable with his drawer crib, now with a folded sheet padding the bottom. His new turning over abilities put them both on alert, knowing he could get himself in trouble, but as of yet, once he was full, he slept well, giving Jamie and Claire several hours in which to explore each other.

Jamie rolled to the edge of the bed to check on Alex.

“Sleeping soundly,” he whispered as he rolled away from the edge, landing on his back.

He lounged there, Claire happily scanning the full extent of his naked body. She brushed her hand across his body several inches below his navel and watched him shiver and stiffen with arousal.

“Well, it looks like it might be a happy birthday for me after all,” Claire murmured.

They hadn’t had sex since the end of July, and Claire had been a very different shape at the time, so no matter what, this was going to be a different experience. Claire collected one of the condoms and put it on Jamie. She smirked at first.

“I didn’t know Nessie would be smiling at me,” she quipped, as the visage of a water-horse stared back at her from Jamie’s crotch.

Jamie peered down, sheepish grin growing as his ear tips pinked. They both laughed a bit, and then Jamie reached out and surrounded Claire’s waist with his hands. He brought her closer and held her just above himself. She nodded, and he lowered her. With a deep sigh from both sides, the joy of being joined coursed through them.
Bree reluctantly checked her phone at the end of the day for messages. There were three missed calls with no message from her mother, and one message from Cassidy.

“Sorry I missed your birthday, Da just mentioned it was Claire’s birthday today, and I know yours is just a few days earlier. Maybe we can get together for some belated cake. Call me back, we’ll set something up.”

It was the lifeline Brianna needed just now. She’d been so wrapped up in her misery she’d forgotten she had a friend she could turn to. It had been a long time since Bree had a real friend – not since…Brianna shook off the memory. Her last ‘friend’ hadn’t bothered to warn her about the predator little brother before inviting her away for the summer. Cassidy could understand because she knew what made Brianna different, she could be trusted.

Right as things cleared out on Friday, even before Wake had left, Brianna headed out herself. Bree pulled up to the curb in front of Cassidy’s parent’s house, where the young Macleod was once more living. Cass came out quickly, and slipped into the passenger seat. As she turned to greet Brianna, she sucked in a breath. Bree’s eyes were red and puffy, and her face looked patchy, and her knuckles were white from grasping the steering wheel.

“Bree?” Cass asked with great concern.

“He rejected me – I finally…made my move on Wake, and he rejected me,” Bree haltingly told Cassidy.

Bree gulped again and again, fighting the urge to sob uncontrollably.

“Oh, Bree, I’m so sorry. I was sure…he just…looked at you like…I don’t understand. It seemed so clear.” Cass was confused, but reached out to comfort Brianna.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Cass elicited, wanting the details so she could make sense of it
herself.

Bree snuffed as Cass held her tight into her shoulder.

“I…kissed him, and he kissed me at first, but…he pushed me back, wanted to know if I’d…done it before.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I had…once, and that’s when he said we couldn’t…and he left.”

Cassidy shook her head.

“Men,” she toned in a low voice. “Maybe he wasn’t comfortable with you making the move – but I woulda thought…I don’t know. Wake had all the signs. I’m sorry if I steered you wrong.”

“It’s not your fault,” Brianna barely made audible. “I went after him…I wanted to know, and now I do. I just hope he doesn’t tell anyone what a fool I made of myself.”

They sat in silence for some time, Cass pressing her hand on top of Bree’s

“I think we need a girl's night,” Cassidy proclaimed.

“A girl's night?” Bree questioned.

“Yeah, just the two of us, junk food, and a kick-ass video marathon – and I know just what DVD to bring. You up for it?”

“I guess.”

“You need to think about you for a while, and this is just how to do it – I'm an expert when it
comes to getting your heart broken, and what to do to recover from it...Trust me?"

Bree nodded.

“Don't worry, he'll be naught but a memory before you know it.”

Bree nodded, but she gulped, sad at the thought things were over with Wake before they ever really were anything.

~~~~~

Cassidy arrived that night with a large tote bag.

“This is my girl's night heartbreak fix kit – popcorn, cookies and the series collection of Xena – you can't watch her kicking butts without feeling empowered!”

Bree shrugged and let Cass pass by her into the house.

“I've never watched it,” Bree confessed.

“Really? Well, I've picked out one of my favorite episodes to start with – I figured you needed to laugh a little...Wow, this place is awesome – you're damn good.”

“Thank-you. I worked really hard to make this perfect for my mom and dad,” Bree revealed as she signaled Cassidy into the kitchen.

“I've done some baking – my favorite brownies always make me feel better, and if you want some hot chocolate, I've got all the makings.”

“See, you've got the hang of this girl's night thing already!”
Brianna led Cassidy upstairs, all the while pointing out relevant details.

“There is a bathroom tucked in the back corner of the kitchen, but for now, the main bathroom is still this one on the second floor, but we’ll be sleeping on the third floor tonight. I’ve got two bedrooms set up, so you can have your own room, or we can bunk in together in my room.”

“It’s a girl’s night, Bree, like a slumber party for the broken-hearted – we’re bunking together, if we ever make it off the couch – I take my DVD viewing seriously – it could be an all-nighter.”

Cassidy was trying to keep everything upbeat, but Bree was well ensconced in her misery. Cass put a hand on Bree’s back.

“I know, it hurts like hell.”

Brianna nodded furiously, trying to hold back her tears.

“I really thought…” Bree couldn’t even finish her thought.

“I know, so did I.”

They headed back down and into the new living room, snuggled up together on the couch, wrapping themselves in blankets and tucking pillows around. Bree was a little resistant at first, offering to light a fire, but Cassidy wrapped her arm around Brianna’s shoulder and pulled her in against her.

“I've got you,” Cass comforted, “I'll get you through.”

Bree smiled, but teared up as well.
“This episode is the best – the director has a wicked sense of humor – he was in the “sister” show, 'Hercules', but he's got an amazing touch as a director.”

Cass nodded reassuringly as the “A Day In The Life” episode of Xena began to roll.

~~~~~

Bree was sleeping deeply when the closing credits rolled. Cassidy aimed a sad smile at her friend.

“Sometimes the best cure for heartbreak is sleep,” Cass murmured, slowly extracting herself from the couch, and slipping a pillow into Bree’s arms and under her head.

Cassidy gave herself the tour of the rest of the house, seeing for herself there was still a lot of work to be done in some of the rooms, and that Bree would still have to be face to face with Wake for quite some time. That would complicate trying to forget him. She realized she would have to do the turbo version of rejection recovery this weekend, just to get Bree’s heart hardened off enough to withstand daily contact with Wake.

~~~~~

A few hours later, Bree awoke. For a moment she expected to look up and see Wake looking back down at her like he had at the end of movie night at the manse. She whimpered. Cassidy heard the plaintive cry and quickly came to offer her support.

“It’s OK to feel that way,” Cass reassured.

“What if I can’t stop feeling that way?” Bree flopped in the opposite direction on the couch.


“Time?” Brianna queried.
“You will feel better, but it will take time. You spent a long time getting close to him, and it will take time to put those feelings away…Maybe if you got away from him for a while…”

“I’ve tried that…twice,” Bree replied.

“Aye, but that was before. Now you know it’s not gonna be a thing. You were still anticipating something before.”

“Well,” Brianna hemmed, “My friend David invited me to spend the holidays with him. We haven’t seen each other in a really long time…”

“Perfect – a change of scenery, an old friend – you hash over old times, and forget all about what’s-his-name. You come back a new woman.”

“I’ll have to ask Wake to keep watch over the house.”

“Even better – nothing says I’m over you more than spending the holidays with someone else,” Cassidy declared as she beamed at Brianna.

~~~~~

Cassidy stayed with Brianna until Monday morning, keeping her mind off Wake as much as possible, but letting Brianna lament about the loss she felt, and curse him out for making her think she’d caught his eye. Bree was on an emotional roller-coaster. She even broke out the recording of “I hate you” from Jamie’s punk band, but by late Sunday night, Bree was all cried out, she’d expelled all her rage. All that was left was a dull ache in her heart, and forlorn look on her face.

“You’ll be alright,” Cassidy confirmed as they shared morning coffee.

Cassidy saw Wake pull into the yard just as Bree walked her to the door. She made a show of giving Brianna a big hug, and once Bree had closed the door, Cass sauntered past Wake, leering at him with a scowl on her face.

“Mornin’,” Wake offered in greeting.
Cassidy ‘hrumf’-ed, nearly growling her displeasure at him.

He sighed and shook his head, his forehead pinched, his heart heavy.
While Jamie and I got back to our regular level of intimacy for the most part, he, in no uncertain
terms, told me we would NOT be engaging on Samhain this year, as too many improbable things
seemed to arise in association with the time the veil between this world and the next was at its
thinnest. We had made Alex one year before, and Jamie didn’t want to tempt fate.

Alex and Jamie survived the second round of vaccinations, even with only Alex actually getting an
injection, it was difficult for Jamie. I think Jamie’s coming around to like Dr. Adler now that we’ve
moved past the circumcision issue. He can see the way Alex reacts favorably to the doctor, and as
long as Jamie feels that Alex is getting the proper treatment, he will defer to my wishes to have Dr.
Adler as Alex’s pediatrician.

I am a bit worried about the next round of vaccinations as both Alex and Jamie will be getting their
Flu shots. The potential for a reaction, however mild - I’ve seen how miserable it can make a baby.

Alex’s curiosity about the world around him has continued to grow, as have his hand/eye
coordination and his verbal skills. And I find myself contemplating my return to work. I have
several more months of maternity and personal leave time left. I know Jamie could manage without
me, and Alex is far more attached to his father than he will ever be to me. I’m sure I’ll be able to
think about it more clearly as time goes by. I’m not ready to give up on my career. I believe I still
have much to offer as a doctor, and Alex will want for nothing under Jamie’s doting.

November put the shoe on the other foot, as Wake couldn’t find the right time, or courage, to tell
Brianna he was sorry for his abrupt departure, or why he’d left her without explaining. The
weather turned yet again, so work on the tower was halted. Short, cold days passed with only a few
good hours of work getting done each day. Wake threw in to help the men working on the
outbuildings, knowing he wasn’t welcome in the house just now. Brianna even left his washed
laundry sitting outside waiting for him to collect it, not even having the heart to angrily return it to
him. Bree only rarely came to the manse for dinner, and Wake often opted for the pub for his
dinners, knowing Fiona would ask too many questions that he didn’t have answers for.

Brianna and Wake were both miserable, but too stubborn and too scared to reach out to each other.
Things were absolutely icy between them, and there was no thaw in sight.
As December began, Brianna finally couldn’t maintain the outward anger and the inward hurt. Cassidy had been right – time was what Bree had needed. She was now able to put most of her pain aside, and function normally around everybody else, but when Wake was around, the normally bright visage turned grey. Brianna was now counting the days until she made her holiday escape. All the workers had been informed of the break for Christmas. Several of them approached Wake, asking that the break extend several days into the new year, and would he ask Brianna about it for them.

“She’s given us the week before Christmas, and the lead up to Hogmanay, but she wants us back to work with only a day to recover.”

“I’ll talk wi’ her. Perhaps inviting her to celebrate a Scottish Hogmanay will help her understand – she’ll never have been part of one,” Wake suggested.

“You’re a good man, Wake MacKenzie – you’d be welcome as our first-footer.”

“I appreciate the offer, but, ah…”

“Doona trouble yourself, lad – probably have plans already.”

“I, um, yeah,” Wake replied, wishing those plans were being Brianna’s first-footer.

For a moment he fell into that thought, coming to Brianna’s door on New Year’s Eve, traditional gifts for good fortune of coal, shortbread, salt, and whisky in his hand, heartfelt apology offered, a gentle kiss plied to her lips.

“No…I’ll make it clear to her you appreciate the Christmas break, but would rather have a few days after the new year…somehow,” he added under his breath.

~~~~~

As the day came to a close, Wake nervously walked up to the door at the house and knocked.
“Bree, a matter has arisen,” he called through the door.

She came out of the house and closed the door behind her, not letting him into the house.

“Um…the men are quite pleased with the holiday break, but…they wonder if you could shift it some. Hogmanay is our big day, more so than Christmas, you see. They’d appreciate a few days after the new year to get themselves straightened out.”

“Oh, really? You know what, that works for me. They can still start their breaks on the twentieth, but…would the fifth do? The Thursday after New Year’s?”

“That’d be fine,” Wake nodded. “Bree, I’d…”

She looked at him without a hint of warmth.

“Thank-you,” he said contritely.

He deeply exhaled as he walked away.

~~~~~

Fiona sat shaking her head.

“Those two. Bree won’t come if she thinks Wake will be here, and Wake lurks in the shadows if they both end up here at the same time. It’s a shame.”

“Aye. Should we intervene?” Roger probed.

“It would just root them both, and you’d never make either one budge. Perhaps over Christmas – Brianna promised to come last year – although I doona blame the lass for swan-ing off in the state she was in. I canna believe how long they both can maintain a silence between them.”
“Aye, but that just means they care – if it truly was nothing, they’d have both moved on by now.”


It was the last day before the holiday break. Fiona had given Wake instructions to tell Brianna he’d be driving her to the manse for Christmas Eve and not let her drive herself. The official excuse was lack of parking, but Fiona had an ulterior motive. Wake was about to give Brianna Fiona’s directive when he was struck speechless. Brianna was wheeling two small suitcases out of the house behind her.

“Going somewhere, lass?” he reflexively uttered.

“I’m spending the holidays with an old friend. We reconnected over Facebook a while back, and he invited me to join him – actually, pushing the workers break let me have two full weeks with David.”

“Mam thought…”

“I know, I’m sorry – tell her that for me? I know there’s nobody to supervise during the break, but do you think you could check on the house from time to time for me? You still have a key?”

“Aye,” he slowly replied.

“There’s my taxi – see you next year,” Bree said, smiling in Wake’s presence for the first time since everything went sideways.

He watched as she placed her two suitcases in the trunk and got into the cab. Brianna wasn’t coming for Christmas, she wouldn’t be home on New Year’s Eve. His dreams of finding redemption with Brianna were growing smaller and smaller, the cab becoming a dot on the horizon.

With an empty yard surrounding him, Wake landed hard as his knees crumbled beneath him.

“She’s gone,” he mumbled.
Wake didn’t resurface until Christmas Eve. He arrived at the manse for the yearly family gathering looking tired, and having a four day growth of beard – which on Wake was a very well grown in beard already.

“There he is,” Roger quipped as Wake finally arrived, “and with his Winter chin-sulation,” he joked, patting his hand on Wake’s back.

“You’ve always done a beard proud. Sometimes I think about growing mine out again,” Roger espoused, stoking his chin as he remembered his bearded days. “But yer Mam has too strong of a gag reflex, so if I grow it she wilna even kiss me. And of course there’s the itchy phase, too…” he waxed, “Glad you finally made it.”

Fiona kept looking up the hall behind Wake.

“Can you not do just one simple thing I ask of you? Where is Brianna? All I asked was for you to bring her! Do I have to go get her myself?”

Wake put up a hand defensively.

“She’s no there,” Wake answered, shaking his head.

“What do you mean?” Fiona inflected.

“She’s gone off for the holidays…an old friend asked her to join him – David she said his name was.”

Wake sighed deeply and walked off into the depths of the house, clearly crest-fallen.

Fiona and Roger looked at each other, alarmed.
“She played that awfully close to the vest,” Fiona complained.

“Aye, she did,” Roger said with a nod, grasping Fiona on each upper arm and kissing her on top of the head, “And I don’t like the implication.”

“Nor do I,” Fiona hissed.

~~~~~

There were forty-five gifts sitting under the tree in the study, two for each child and grandchild of Fiona and Roger, and Fiona’s gift for Brianna. Among those gifts, a tradition Fiona began when her first child, Jem, reached a certain age. She calls them ‘hygiene packs’. Each one contains a six pack of underwear, a six pack of socks, a twelve pack of razors, deodorant, foot powder, toothpaste and brush, sanitary products for the girls who have reached that age, and condoms for any of them over the age of fifteen regardless of gender.

Wake and Rabbie are the only children still receiving the ‘packs’ as they are still single, and a number of the grandchildren are too young for anything but the socks and underwear, but Fiona assembles appropriate packs each year. That's why there are two gifts per person – the ‘packs’ are practical, the other gift is fun or a want.

They sat around on Christmas Eve, nibbling cookies and other treats as one by one the ‘fun’ gifts were opened. It had grown as the family had grown, and now the manse was bursting at the seams with joy, laughter, and one very subdued Wake.

“Nollaig Chridheil,” Roger announced as he stood by the tree watching all the frivolity. Even if just the children of this extended family kept it alive, Gaelic would not be a lost language if Roger MacKenzie had anything to say about it, recalling with a smile something he heard once about two professional baseball players, one pitcher, one catcher, who used to yell their pitch selection to each other in Gaelic during the game, and no one was the wiser. His smile turned sad as he saw Wake.

“Here you go,” Roger said as he handed Wake his ‘fun’ gift.

Wake pulled the paper open and smiled at the wooden box that held the bottle.

“That’s some of the really good stuff,” Roger informed his youngest, “So, a little goes a long way.”
“Thanks Da,” Wake murmured, giving Roger a hug. “I’ll put it to good use.”

Wake heaved a sigh. Everything took effort right now, from breathing to moving to thinking. He begged off early, unable to rouse his spirits enough to feel like he even belonged around other people today.

~~~~~

“Happy Christmas, Fiona,” Claire addressed, “Did Brianna have fun with the Mackenzies this year?”

“Um, she wasn’t here – did she not tell you her plans?”

“Where -? No, she didn’t, um…did something happen?”

“She told Wake an old friend invited her for the holidays, and she decided to go,” Fiona told her, fibbing slightly about the ‘something happening’ side of things.

“An old friend?” Claire questioned.

“I think the name was David something.”

“David?…oh that makes sense. He spent Christmas with us one year if it’s who I think, and I think I better call Bree. She led me to believe she’d be spending Christmas with you this year.”

“I guess it was a rather last minute choice on her part. We were caught a bit off guard ourselves, but she’s an adult; she can make her own choices now.”

“I’m sorry…”

“No need to apologize, dear. Apparently Bree felt she needed a change of scenery.”
“You wouldn’t happen to know where David is, would you?”

“Not a clue.”

“Well, at least you have your family around you. I wanted to thank you for the gift you sent for Alex. Jamie loved them. Where on earth did you find the yarn to knit him monster feet?”

“A friend of mine bought it by mistake as part of an online order, and gave it to me.”

“He looks adorable in them. I actually thought I might catch Bree there, thank her for the present she sent for Alex.”

“At least she sent him something.”

“Yes, a very nice set of building blocks.”

“That would figure, wouldn’t it? I swear I sent building sets to her every birthday and holiday.”

“And she still has them all, and used them well, Fee.”

“Och, well, you canna keep them kids forever.”

“No, I suppose you can’t. Happy holidays, Fee, and have a good Hogmanay.”

“And you, Claire, send Jamie my love.”

“Gladly, Fee, and the same to Roger.”

~~~~~
The Manse was crowded, awash with life this Christmas day. And all the available MacKenzie families, and adjunct families, were there...save one. Wake never came, and as a big meal was in the offing, that worried Fiona and Roger. They had expected Wake to arrive yesterday with Brianna in tow for the Christmas Eve she had begged off from the year before, but instead, Wake arrived alone, with the news that Brianna had gone off to be with an old friend in another country over the holidays, once more leaving him in charge of Lallybroch in her absence.

Standing at the head of the table, Roger raised his glass, and might as well have said 'start your engines' for the way the food was voraciously divvied.

"Ith do leor!", he toasted, "Eat your fill."

As the sun set, and the food comas set in, Fiona was putting together a to-go package of leftovers.

"I'll take this to Wake," Fiona insisted as Roger found her crimping the foil and putting the lot in the picnic basket.

Roger put a hand on Fiona’s shoulder.

"No, I’ll go," Roger volunteered, “Sometimes a boy needs to talk to his Da, and I think this is one of those times. Bree takin’ off like that...he’s broken the lass’s heart, and his own.”

"Did we...warn him off too much?"

Roger shook his head.

"We couldn’t let him play with her heart if he didna mean it...”

“But it seems this time...” Fiona trailed off.

“Aye, this time.”
Roger waited until everyone else had migrated into the study for the viewing of holiday movies and shows, and even sent Fiona in after a kiss, slipping away with Christmas dinner for his youngest, pretty sure where he would find the lad.

~~~~~

It was a long, lonely drive out to Lallybroch with only a picnic basket to keep him company. Roger thought about what he’d say to Wake, but soon realized it all depended on the state he found the boy in. He might be inconsolable.

A few dim lights twinkled through the row of windows that looked in on the living room, and the licking of flames reflected from the hearth. Roger grabbed the picnic basket and made his way to the door, finding it unlocked. He sighed in relief at not having to get Wake to let him in.

Roger found his way to the kitchen, and dropped off the mercy meal. He steeled himself, wanting to be prepared for whatever he found. He carefully picked his way toward the living room, led by the light of the fire until he stood at Wake’s feet.

“At least you’re still drinkin’ by the glass, lad,” Roger consoled himself as he looked down at Wake slumped against the raised hearth, his glass and half empty bottle of his Christmas gift sitting above his head.

Roger eased himself down next to Wake and patted his hand on his son’s knee.

“You havna gone straight to drinkin’ from the bottle, so you’ve not lost all hope.”

“Da?”

“Aye?”

“I’ve made a royal cock-up of things.”

“By the looks of it,” Roger confirmed.
“She’s meeting up with an old friend…someone she has history with. I’ve lost my chance.”

“Could be.”

Wake turned to look at his father.

“She was the one, and I’ve…blown it.”

Roger put his arm around Wake’s shoulders without looking, and Wake turned and buried his face in his father’s shoulder, stifling his sob before it could get out. Roger closed his eyes as he felt Wake convulse, his stomach muscles tightening over and over as his misery poured out. Roger put his hand on the back of Wake’s head, holding him as if he could draw the pain from his mind.

It took a while, but Wake quieted, but kept his face buried in his father’s shoulder until he was ready to draw back.

“Alright now?”

Wake nodded slowly.

“Yer mam told me about what happened with Bree, but she did more than tell you how she felt, didn’t she?” Roger asked.

“She kissed me…and I mean she kissed me, but…you’d warned me off more than once, as did Jem, and I know I deserved it based on things I’ve done in the past, but…”

Wake shook his head and closed his eyes.

“In my efforts to not hurt her, I wounded her deeply, perhaps irreparably. But I don’t know if she can forgive me, because I have been unable to forgive myself.”
“Och, Wake, the only advice I can offer up now would be yer mam’s favorite – when all else fails, eat. I’ve brought a basket – shall we?”

Wake sighed and slowly rose to his feet, reaching back down to give Roger a hand. Roger nodded and slipped his arm around Wake’s back as they walked to the kitchen.

~~~~~~

Roger unpacked the entire basket, spreading the contents out on the table, and then dropping the basket down beside himself. The men scanned the feast that was before them, glanced at each other, and both zeroed in on the liberal slice of pie.

Roger nodded.

“It’s what I’d do,” he told his son.

The rest of the foods sat untouched as the pair made short work of the pie, and then they just sat.

After the prolonged silence, Roger looked at Wake, trying to judge his state of mind.

“Would you like me to stay wi’ ye?” Roger asked.

“I appreciate the gesture, but I think I need to be alone, here, for a bit. The house will be empty until the new year. I’ll use that time to…exercise some demons, clear my head…”

“Get yourself ready to see her every day?”

Wake nodded as his lips rolled into his mouth.

“If that’s possible…I’m…glad you came out here. I promise not to do…anything rash. I just…need to lick my wounds.”
“Alright, but doona close the door on Bree yet. If your feelings run as deep as you think, there might still be chance.”

Wake nodded, wishing his father’s words could be true. Roger reluctantly left his hurting son at Lallybroch, knowing nothing but time would cure his ills.

~~~~~

Alone again, Wake ambled back into the living room. As he reached for the bottle of whisky on the hearth, he had a memory flash of Bree as she lay upon the hearth. He poured himself one more drink.

“Happy Christmas Goddess, wherever you are.”

Wake raised his glass toward the fire and toasted to his memory of Bree rolling over on the hearth, his heart skipping a beat as he thought about the look she gave him as she left the room that morning. If only he could have turned things around after spurning her advance, she might be there with him right now, instead of miles away with someone else. He’d had weeks to tell her why he pushed her away, his fear of hurting her, but if he was honest with himself, he was afraid, not just of hurting her, but, for as long as the possibilities hung in the air, anything was possible, and the anticipation had been so good, could the reality live up to it? He wished he’d had the courage to find out, because he might never know now.

~~~~~

He drained the glass after his toast to Brianna, realizing it was one drink too many to deny that he was drunk, or at least well buzzed, and no longer capable of standing unassisted. He sat on the hearth next to the rest of his bottle of whisky, and placed the glass next to it.

The flames were still licking, filling the opening of the fireplace. As the orange and red appendages stirred, a half asleep Wake swore he saw Brianna’s form, fire made life, reaching out for him.

“You could have had this,” the being of flames told him.

“And it would have been worth the burns,” he mumbled in return as alcohol fueled sleep finally
overtook him, and he slid off the hearth to the floor.

Wake couldn’t escape Brianna even in his dreams tonight. His mind had taken him back to where it all started – the mill stream – the moment he had realized the form on the ground was a naked woman – a naked Brianna Fraser. Images of Bree paraded in front of his mind’s eye – her standing there in his sweater, and later that day when he held her to warm her up back in the house. The desperate longing he felt when she fell asleep in his lap at the manse; all the times they nearly kissed; the look on her face when she chanced upon him naked – the come hither look after he’d found her sleeping on the hearth. God, if only he’d followed her that morning, taken the chance and pulled her into his arms. Every purposeful or inadvertent touch flashed through his mind; every glance, every smile sent a chill down his spine.

All the signs had been there. Brianna had been steadily opening up to the possibilities of more than friendship, and she had been ready that day when she came to him and gathered him into her towel. Her body was on fire, like the licking flames, and she sought to consume him, consummate the mating dance that had been so long in building. But he’d put an end to it all with four softly spoken words – “we canna do this.” Her image faded slowly, slipping away, disappearing into the distance. He yelled “no” as she slipped beyond his reach, waking himself from this dream, plunging him back into a reality where Brianna Fraser was beyond his reach.

He covered his face with his hands, and he cried once more.
Feile Brighde (the quickening of the year)

Chapter Notes

Been a tough few weeks of being trapped in my yard by the ice, but I did get a lot of writing done. Still trying to make the connection to one of my big scenes that I've been so anticipating sharing, but it's a few chapters away. I know I left things in a sad place last time, let's hope this chapter renews your hope. (hope I got to the formatting problem - posting from home with dial-up is no fun!)

Feile Brighde

(the quickening of the year)

Brianna ambled across the yard from where her taxi had let her out heading for the front door of the house at Lallybroch, finally home from her Christmas/New Year’s sojourn. She walked by Wake’s familiar truck, noticing a fully-bearded worker talking to one of the men who was residing the barns. When the two men ended their conversation, the man with the beard turned to look at Brianna.

Surprised at what she saw, Bree’s mouth dropped open the slightest bit, and she unconsciously walked toward him.

“Wake? Is that you?” she added. His green eyes sparkled at her recognition.

“Aye.”

“I almost didn’t recognize you with the beard.”

Wake stroked his chin and smiled, not sure what to say to her.

“You look so different,” she commented.

He devoured her with his eyes, wanting more than anything to say ‘And you look amazing’ before grabbing her and kissing her until both of their knees buckled, but he just took in a deep breath.
Bree smiled at him once more and headed into the house, Wake watching her go, longing to have not screwed things up with her, and feeling she was lost to him.

~~~~~

There was a serenity in Brianna’s demeanor even she didn’t really recognize. The anger and defensiveness of the last few months was gone. She was genuinely happy to be back at Lallybroch, and back to work. After leaving her luggage in the house, Brianna came back out and checked on what the workers were up to. They’d only been back at it since this morning, so little had changed since she’d last seen it, but her change in attitude brought a new light to everything.

“Anything I can do?” she asked, feeling the want to get her hands dirty today.

“If you like, lass,” one of the men relayed in a fatherly tone, directing her to a nearby ladder, and pointing up, “I’d like to say thank-you for giving us the days after Hogmanay – Bliadhna mhath ur.”

“Happy New Year to you too,” Bree replied, showing she understood him, even if she didn’t dare try to repeat it just now.

Bree smiled nervously, nodding graciously at him as she held the two sides of the ladder and glanced up, but she had no real fear of heights, so up she went to help complete the upper level skin of the largest barn. It was actually going to be used partly as a garage to hide any vehicles, with farm equipment on the other side, and a loft for storage above it all.

Her energy, her verve, was back.

No one hadn’t noticed her bent for isolation over the last few months, but no one said a thing.

~~~~~

After an afternoon spent trying to reacclimatize to the local time zone, and keep jet lag from forcing her to nap in the middle of the day, she called Fiona.
“I’m back…and I’m sorry I didn’t tell you myself about…going away for the holidays…”

“Don’t you worry, you’ll tell us all about it when you come for dinner tomorrow night – I would expect you need the sleep tonight after two weeks in…where did you say you went?” Fiona wheedled, knowing well she’d never said, or at the very least, Wake never conveyed that information. Brianna gulped, hearing a hint of displeasure in Fiona’s tone.

“I was in Amsterdam.”

“Beautiful city – I’m sure you enjoyed yourself – bring along any photos you might have taken – I’d love to see the sights through your eyes. Six PM, promptly.”

“I, um…I’ll be there.”

~~~~~

Bree brought her laptop to dinner at Roger and Fiona’s so she could share her holiday pictures. While Fee put the finishing touches on the meal, Brianna started showing some of her more technical pictures to Roger, hoping he would appreciate them the way she was sure Wake would if she ever got the chance to share them with him.

“I wish I could put in a system like that for some of the low land around Lallybroch,” Brianna told Roger as she showed him parts of the dyke system that kept Holland dry, if not high.

“Tell me ye made time for fun on this trip,” Roger teased, seeing how Bree’s eyes lit up as she told him about the engineering marvels she witnessed.

“This was fun,” she said with a very straight face, slowly breaking into a smile.

“It’s good to see you smile, Wren.”

She curled her lip momentarily and grumbled under her breath, wishing he would just call her by her name. Brianna opened her mouth to say something about Roger’s penchant for using ‘pet’ names, but Fiona poked her head in just then.
“Don’t let it get cold, it’s time to eat,” she called, “And you better not have looked at all the pictures without me.”

“Just windmills and water works, hen,” Roger imparted, planting a kiss on Fiona’s forehead as he passed into the kitchen.

Bree strode slowly behind him, Fee turning and putting her arm around Brianna’s back to walk her in to the table.

~~~~~~

“This trip, it was rather sudden,” Fiona began her interrogation.

“I reconnected with an old friend, and he invited me for the holidays…and I needed to get away for a while.”

“Oh?” Fee seemingly innocently inquired.

“Let the girl be,” Roger interjected, knowing Fiona’s wheedling tone.

“No,” Brianna warmly stated, “It’s OK…I…i love Lallybroch…but, I was beginning to feel like Snow White, or Rapunzel,” she added, pawing her long braid over her shoulder.

“You left Wake in charge while you were gone?” Fiona half asked – half stated.

“He did a good job when I went home for Alex’s birth…Did he say something? I wouldn’t have asked…”

“No, dear,” Fiona soothed, “He didnা say a word about that,” she emphasized the final word.

“So, an old friend?” Roger inquired.
“Yeah, David and I hadn’t seen each other in years, but we were inseparable when we were younger. He’s actually the one who got me on the stage the first time – did my mom send you videos of my musicals?”

“I think she did, Wren. I recall you singin’ and dancin’ – and now that I do remember that, you’ll not duck out the next time the family gathers for a sing along!”

Bree blushed and gave Roger a sly grin.

“I detect something in that look on your face,” Roger surmised.

Brianna suddenly became very interested in what was on her plate.

“We…did karaoke one night – David dared me…said I’d let my voice go.”

She looked back up.

“How could I let that pass?”

“Quite right, you have a family name to defend, after all!” Roger proclaimed.

“And if I know your generation like I think I do, you’ll have captured that on your phone as well,” Fiona burbled.

Bree nodded with a sheepish grin on her face that crinkled the corners of her eyes.

~~~~~

Brianna regaled Fiona and Roger with tales from her trip to Holland while Fiona plied the girl with food from appetizers to dessert, and continued to wheedle whatever she could from their young guest.
“So, do we get to see you sing now?” Fiona asked as Brianna pushed her chair back from the table.

Bree blushed.

“What song did you choose, Wren?” Roger inquired, putting a hand on the back of her shoulder to escort her into the study where she’d left her computer when Fiona voiced the dinner bell.

“I’m not sure you’ll know it.”

“I’ve got over twenty-five years of pop music that I’ve endured at the hands of my children, so…”

“It’s called ‘Don’t Start With Me’, it was done by a woman name Michelle Wright.”

“Let’s have a listen,” Roger encouraged as he took a seat on the couch.

Bree sat next to him and Fiona sandwiched her. She had butterflies in her stomach as she started the video playing. Bree couldn’t even look at herself, closing her eyes as the song went on. She smiled as she listened, realizing her voice wasn’t all that bad.

As the recording of Brianna belted out the lyrics, “Don’t start with me, unless you’re gonna love me endlessly, you say you’ve never broken a heart, baby don’t start with me”, Fiona heard a sound from the kitchen and caught the flash of a shadow passing the doorway. A fishy grin worked its way up her face, knowing that Wake had arrived to scavenge a supper, much as she expected, and with what she now knew about Brianna’s trip, and the friend she went to see, arranging this ‘chance’ meeting between the two of them was going just as she hoped.

Wake stood at the door to the study, licking his lips clean. Only Fiona noticed him standing there and subtly acknowledged him, a hang dog expression on his face. His anguish only growing as he listened to Brianna sing, he looked heartsick. Bree was laying her heart out in song, and all Wake could think was how he’d spurned her when it was the last thing he’d wished to do.
He was about to slip away, when Fiona let his presence be known.

“Come in here, Wake,” she said without turning.

Both Roger and Brianna turned to see him standing there, now essentially trapped into making an appearance.

“Did you find enough to eat?” Fee asked.

“Um, yeah,” he said with a nod as he took several halting steps into the room, having trouble even looking in Brianna’s direction.

“You should come over and look at some of her photos – enough to make an architect or engineer lose their minds. Bree – show him!”

“Oh, no, this one is David,” she corrected Roger.

Wake leaned in to see the man he was sure Brianna was now building a relationship with, but there were three people in that picture – Bree and two men.

“Then who’s the big fella there?” Wake pointed.
“That’s his husband, Noah – He works on the dyke system, which is how I got some of these pictures,” she said in an aside to Roger.

“Oh,” Wake said, somewhat delayed, “…OH…excuse me for a moment.”

Wake strode quickly back into the kitchen and he pasted his back to the wall that obscured him the best.

“Taing do dhia,” Wake breathed out a rare bit of Gaelic, closing his eyes and letting his mouth go slack.

With a huff of air he tilted his head back and cast his eyes up to the molded ceiling above him. He turned to face the wall as he heard Fiona approaching, pressing himself to it, trying to hide the moisture in his eyes.

“Glad you came over tonight?” his mother asked.

Wake turned yet again, his back sliding down the wall until he was crouched low to the floor, his face cradled in his own hands.

“Did you know?” he asked his mother.

“Not for sure, but you needed to know one way or the other. She’s not lost to you…so get in there and pretend to be interested in her photos even if you aren’t!”

He dabbed the corners of his eyes.

“Thanks mam,” he emitted as she helped him back up to his full height.

It was well after midnight when Bree and Wake were finished looking at her pictures and talking. Bree had so many new ideas about things she thought would be helpful at Lallybroch, and Wake listened to every word she had to say, whether the ideas were feasible or not. Roger and Fiona had long since gone to bed, leaving the pair of them alone in the study, and Wake was not going to do or say anything that would make Brianna think about leaving. They were nearly snuggled into the
corner of the couch so they both could see the images on the screen, and Wake was reveling in the warmth of her body.

“Now, I think you’ve left something out,” Wake risked. “I seem to remember a song.”

Bree stiffened up.

“Oh…that,” she said with ambivalence in her voice.

“Yeah, that…I heard it earlier, some of it anyway…you have a beautiful voice,” he complimented, humming the words in her ear.

Brianna blushed and sat away from him a bit, not wanting him to feel the shivers that were going up her spine or how she had just gone from ‘warm’ to ‘too hot’ just because she’d felt his breath tickle the hair on her neck.

“OK…I’ll play it for you, but…I can’t…I can’t watch myself again.”

Brianna clicked the file open and put her computer on Wake’s lap.

“I’ll be back when it’s done,” she told him, then scurried to the bathroom, having been holding it in because she didn’t want to break the mood between them.

Wake sat transfixed. It was as if Brianna was one of the sirens, luring him in for a crash landing.

When Brianna returned, the song wasn’t quite over, but she was drawn to watch Wake watching her sing. His hand was tracing the outline of her face on the screen. Bree traced her own fingers down her face, imagining how it might feel to have Wake touch her like that, remembering the way he’d kissed her before he’d stopped what could have been, what could have happened that day. It was clear there were unresolved feelings…for both of them.
When Wake arrived Monday morning, Brianna was happy to see him and headed out to make contact before he could get away.

“I think we should start having our meetings again,” Brianna said, a hint of nervousness in her demeanor.

“As you wish,” Wake burred. Brianna giggled, thinking about how that line was used in The Princess Bride.

She bit her bottom lip as she watched Wake watching her.

“That’s a line from one of my favorite movies,” she explained.

“Is it now?” he said with a lilt that said he knew what he was up to in choosing that phrase, perhaps some inside knowledge garnered by perusing Brianna’s possessions.

Brianna pointed toward the house with her head, and Wake followed her.

“I was thinking that the weather has started getting in the way, so when the outbuildings are completed, maybe it’s time to refurbish the Laird’s room and the North room. They’ve been largely untouched since you stripped them to the framing, and I thought it would make sense to start with the fireplaces.”

Wake nodded.

“The stones are sorted, and should be dry enough to work with by now. I’ll get a hand in taking the stones upstairs.”

“I don’t mind doing some of the ‘grunt’ work, and it will give me the chance to learn more about stonework. I’d like to get to the point where I know what I’m talking about.”

There was a feeling of anticipation between them. Wake nodded his agreement, cautiously optimistic about this turn. If nothing else, they’d be spending time together, and it beat the hell out of the silent treatment he’d been getting the months before.
“If you like – I’d welcome an apprentice.”

It seemed they reached détente now that the new year had begun.

~~~

Bree invited Cassidy out to Lallybroch for another ‘girl’s night’, but this time there was no heartache to cure. Between DVD selections, the pair talked.

“So, getting away did the trick?” Cassidy asked, seeing how relaxed Brianna seemed.

“Getting away did part of it, being able to talk things through with David and his husband helped me see the male perspective.”

Cassidy tilted her head and critically examined Brianna’s face.

“Oh, you’re not? After what it took to pull you out of the rabbit hole?”

Bree smiled.

“No, I’m not. Wake and I talked all night,” Bree revealed as she let go a breath.

“Did he apologize?”

“No…we didn’t talk about that. David played devil’s advocate for me. There was a lot I never considered. Wake and I each jumped from flirting, which I didn’t even know I was doing, straight to going too far. Maybe if we’d gone about it a more normal way, actually gone out…thanks to David, I can see Wake’s side. There was no malice, just misunderstanding. It hurt like hell, so I wrapped that hurt in anger. I didn’t want him to get close enough to see how much pain I was in.”

“So you’re just gonna act like the whole thing never happened?”
“No – “

“Because that’s what it sounds like.”

“Cass, it just felt good to be able to talk to him again.”

Cassidy nodded, slowly, mulling what Brianna had just said.

“So I wasted all that energy hating him for you?”

Cass slowly began to smirk, the expression soon spreading to Brianna’s face as well. She hugged Brianna.

“Be careful…I don’t think I can pick up the pieces if he shatters you again.”

Brianna nodded in return.

~~~~~

Work went along well. Brianna helped Wake while he worked on the fireplaces for the bedrooms, and several of the outbuildings neared completion. The mantle and surround of the fireplace in the North room was going to have to be replaced, as was the lintel – it was charred and brittle in the center, victim of a fire built too high, or that got out of control at some time.

Working side by side, so closely to Wake, was therapeutic for the pair. Each felt a growing closeness again, but neither was of a mind to take it another level. There were both well cowed by their previous failures to connect. Being close friends, with warm feelings for each other was enough, for now.

~~~~~
Jamie was giddy, easy to smile and laugh this morning. Playing with Alex brought out a childlike side of Jamie that was always delightful to see. I found him crawling along the floor, following Alex’s first forays into self-propulsion. I am always amazed at the speed a small child can attain without ever lifting its belly off the floor.

“Are we ready?” I asked as Jamie scooped our son into his arms.

He smiled broadly.

“Almost.”

Jamie nuzzled the boy, eliciting a vocal outburst of joy from Alex.

“Madainn mhath dhut,” Claire growled in Gaelic, “Good morning to you,” she brightly repeated in English, as she did every morning now to engage Alex’s mind, and to start training him to understand his father’s native tongue. She also sent him off to sleep with bilingual greetings, wishing “a good night be with you” with “oidhche mhath leat.”

“Your Gaelic’s coming along there, Sassenach.”

“Well, it has been a few years,” I answered him, “But I want Alex to have the proper foundation in the language. It might make it easier if he chooses to embrace his heritage. I see how Bree struggles with picking it up now as an adult, and I find myself regretting that I didn’t take the steps to find her a teacher – none of the schools offered Gaelic, and being away from Scotland…but, Alex may well spend more years with you than he will with me, and it would be good for him to be able to catch what you’re saying in those times you revert to your first language.”

~~~~~

Another day of vaccination was upon us. All the ones Alex had had before, with the addition of the flu shot. I prepared myself to be up all night, tending to Alex, should he have a bad reaction. I’d had my flu shot before I’d known I was pregnant last fall – before I was pregnant, in actuality. Another trip to the hospital as a patient, but just going there was starting to make me long for being a doctor. Jamie is probably of a mind that Alex would make me forget all about my work, and I do have that pang of guilt at the thought of not seeing each of Alex’s milestones, but as full as my life is right now with Jamie and Alex, I’m still a doctor. It will be time to broach the subject of my working in the coming days.
I got the car seat ready, but found Jamie had other plans for transporting Alex. He’d donned a carrying pouch and already had Alex strapped to his chest, facing in at this stage.

“Looks like I’ll be driving today,” I commented as I picked up the keys that Jamie had left on the dressing table.

“Nah, he’ll still be getting strapped into his car seat, but I wanted to see if this was going to work as well as having him wrapped in a plaid always has. So far, he likes it,” Jamie relayed with a broad smile, bouncing slightly from the knees.

Jamie donned the great coat Fiona sent him, and it was as if the baby disappeared into the folds of the fabric, re-enwombed. You’d never have known a child was strapped to his chest, and Alex was not about to give himself away.

I carried the car seat, while Jamie carried Alex out to the car. I clicked the car seat into place and Jamie transferred the boy, then took the keys from me. I didn’t mind. Jamie’s defensive driving skills were excellent, and I always felt safe as he conducted me on errands. I know he still feels vulnerable, and driving gives him the feeling of being in control. I am willing to cede that control, knowing it makes Jamie feel calmer.

As we drove home, Jamie took a different exit.

“Where are you taking us?” I asked from the back seat.

I like to sit back here with Alex, and with the rear-facing car seat, it is the only way I can actually keep an eye on him while we travel. I wanted to stick close. If Alex were to get a fever, it could be sudden and high in no time. I touched his forehead, and it was still cool, normal.

“I thought it was time to make some introductions,” Jamie answered me as we headed toward the neighborhood where Brianna’s apartment had been.
We were two blocks short of the turn across the tracks to pull up in front of that apartment building, and instead Jamie pulled into a space across the road. There was a strip of businesses there. We parked in front of a non-descript window, and Jamie got out, coming to the back door. He began unsnapping the straps of Alex’s car seat. He tucked our son into the carry pouch against his chest and closed the sides of his great coat, obscuring the boy. He came around to my side, and extended a hand at me.

“Come…meet a friend,” was all he said.

I was curious, intrigued even, and nodded as I let him draw me from the Wagoneer. A bright bell chimed as we passed under it, heading into one of the shops. I was immediately hit by the smell of fresh wood, sawdust, and that smell of warmth wood gets when it’s freshly cut.

“Jamie Fraser?” a voice joyously boomed, heading right for him, leaning in as if to hug him.

Jamie extended a hand to shake his instead, looking down and pointing to his chest.

“What have we here?” the man declared, his eyes brightening.

“This is Alex,” Jamie beamed, opening his coat just a bit. The baby cooed.

“And this is my wife, Claire,” he introduced, curving his arm around me to bring me forward.

“So this is her?” the man said with a nod.

“Aye, Claire Fraser, this is Artemis Gordon. Because of him, Brianna and I got close making the bed Alex was conceived in.”

I blushed all shades of red, I’m sure.

“Jamie,” I whispered, incredulously, my eyes showing my disbelief that he would share so readily.
“Claire, he knew I was making a bed for ye,” Jamie retorted.

“Mrs. Fraser,” Mr. Gordon said with a nod, reaching out to shake my hand, “So grand and lovely to finally meet you. Is Brianna well?”

“Yes,” I answered, “She had a lovely ‘surprise’ trip to Amsterdam over the holidays,” I found myself telling this man who was a stranger to me.

“You couldn’a help yerself, could ye, Sassenach? Artemis has a way about him – can draw the truth outta ye.”

“So I see,” I acknowledged. “I did hear about you, Mr. Gordon. Brianna became fond of you, that I know.”

“Call me Artemis,” he replied, cradling my hand between his, “And I’m glad to hear that.”

“Artemis, then,” I warmly readdressed him.

He nodded as he smiled at me.

“You sure are the vision Jamie said,” Mr. Gordon complimented. I smiled, feeling warm, thinking what Jamie must have told him about me.

I looked over at Jamie, seeing him beaming right back at me.

“Well,” I began to answer, still blushing.

“So you enjoyed the bed?” Mr. Gordon queried, more to Jamie than to me.

“Aye, we did, but with this one about now, we’ve not been back to it in some months.”
“It’s not bathroom adjacent,” I injected.

“Och,” Artemis sounded, “it can be done, but, since there is indoor plumbing, why make your life more difficult, aye?”

There was definitely something about this man.

“So,” Artemis began, “how old?”

He looked more closely at the baby.

“Six months,” I replied, feeling a charge go through my heart.

“Aren’t genetics an odd beast – Alex is a boy, aye?” Jamie nodded. “Well, he’s the spit of you, Claire, just like Brianna is of you, Jamie. Never ceases to amaze me how often nature sees fit to do that – a girl who takes after her father, and a boy who takes after his mother. I’d hazard he’ll favor you even as he grows,” Mr. Gordon said to me. “And Brianna will likely always be his ‘big’ sister, in size, not just age.”

“That’s quite the observation,” I returned.

“Nothing scientific behind it, just something I’ve noticed.”

We stayed and talked to Mr. Gordon for nearly an hour, but Alex was getting fussy, and hungry, and while Artemis Gordon was a lovely man, I did not wish to nurse in front of him.

“Jamie, Alex needs to be fed, and I need him to rather soon,” I tried to impress some urgency.

“Aye,” Jamie nodded, smiling with a bit of a blush.

“I’ll not keep you longer,” Artemis told us, “A pleasure, M’lady,” he said in farewell, and I felt a lump come to my throat.
I teared up.

“\textquote{I haven’t been called that in a very long time.}”

He smiled and put out his hand. I took it and he gently clasped around my fingers. His eyes crinkled, and I could feel the warmth radiating from his smile.

“\textquote{Thank-you for befriending Jamie and Brianna. They found each other through making the bed and decorating the room.}”

“\textquote{Och, the pleasure was mine. Don’t hesitate to drop in again.}”

We were almost out the door when Mr. Gordon called after us once more.

“\textquote{Is there anything you’d want me to build for the boy? Perhaps a high chair?}”

“He will be starting on solids soon,” I responded, looking over at Jamie right after.

“Aye, he will,” Jamie reconfirmed, “Something simple, though, that gets him up to table height, and keeps him close.”

“I know just the thing. I’ll get to work on it.”

“We will pay for it,” I insisted. Jamie smiled first, but it spread to Mr. Gordon.

“Aye, she’ll insist on it,” Jamie told him with a nod.

~~~~~
I was about to explode by the time we reached home. Thankfully, Alex was very hungry and he relieved my pain. After he drank his fill, I checked his forehead one more time. He remained unfevered, and I sighed, hoping it would remain so through the night. Jamie settled Alex into the drawer-cradle and turned his attentions toward me.

“Jamie, you’re flushed.”

I touched his forehead.

“Oh. You’re on fire.”

Jamie grinned salaciously.

“You’re fevered – I think you’re having a reaction to the flu shot.”

I touched Jamie’s cheeks and the base of his neck, both were warm and red. He went downhill rather quickly from there. The light sheen of sweat prickled up on his chest, then broke out across his forehead. He looked at me apologetically, but I shook my head.

“Shh – I’m here. Don’t fight it. This shouldn’t last more than a day. I’m going to get a cool towel for your head, and then tuck you in for the night.”

When I returned from the bathroom with the towel, Jamie was having a wave of chills, his arms clutching and twitching.

“I want to hold Alex,” he moaned.

“Shh…not tonight – when the fever and chills pass.”

“Is he alright?” Jamie asked.

“He’s perfectly fine,” I soothed.
Jamie nodded feebly, closing his eyes as his jaw chattered slightly.

“This is worse than dying,” he murmured.

I left Jamie sleeping fitfully and headed into the kitchen. It was still early evening, and I had not had anything to eat since before we left for Alex’s appointment. I found the odds and ends of several nights’ worth of suppers saved in the fridge, but I wasn’t in the mood for anything heavy. I took the leftover chicken meat from two nights ago, and made myself a small sandwich.

I sat alone in the kitchen, eating my sandwich, knowing I had a long night ahead of me. I hoped I would only have one patient. Jamie would be hard enough to soothe, and if Alex were to come down with any symptoms, I would be hard pressed to keep Jamie from him.

Since there was no telling when Jamie’s fitful sleeping would turn into something else, I decided to call it an early night myself. I took several extra bottles of drinking water and placed them on my bedside table should Jamie require hydration during the night, and I had a spare towel if I needed to wipe him down. The cold towel could be shaken out and cooled between applications when his fever flared.

I checked once more on Alex. He was sleeping, not quite as soundly as he did on Jamie’s chest. But it was unsafe just now for him to be there. Perhaps after I fed him in a few hours, if Jamie’s fever had broken, I might place him there, but I think it might be best if Alex and Jamie had their own space for the night.

Even in his sickened state, Jamie reached out to hold me the moment he felt me land in bed. Despite feeling like a damp rag, his arms around me were soothing. I’d forgotten how much it scared me when Jamie was ill. It was rare, as he was more likely to be injured than sick, but it had happened. Thankfully, Jamie has a strong constitution, and can withstand quite a lot, or he never would have survived to become immortal. He sighed and then moaned, and then fell back asleep.

Jamie had rolled to his back, leaving just one arm under me as he finally seemed to have gotten past the fitful stage. His sweat was starting to dry, and the clamminess was subsiding. He was
breathing easily. I felt like a major hurdle had been passed.

I didn’t want Jamie to be awakened, so I carefully extracted myself from the bed to check on Alex. It was nearly time to feed him again, and I knew if he cried, Jamie would wake, and instinct would direct him to pick our son up. As if on cue, Alex’s eyes opened just as I peered down at him. I bent down and picked him up.

“Shush, now,” I calmly told him as I made my way out of the room before he might decide to cry.

“Ironic, isn’t it,” I toned to Alex as he happily nursed. “I anticipated the possibility that you might be adversely affected by this inoculation, but I never counted on your father taking ill from it. Thank God it is not the both of you. Jamie has done so much to take the pressure off me since you’ve been here. And I’m glad you’ve taken to him the way you have, even if it did make me jealous early on. It will make things so much easier when I return to work.”

~~~~~

Claire resettled Alex after he ate and checked on Jamie before she left that side of the bed. He was much cooler, but she noticed the sheets were rather damp, and a complete change of the bed linens would be in order once Jamie awoke. For the time being, Claire stripped back the covers and found a spare blanket to throw over Jamie’s naked body. Luckily, he’d been down to just his shirt as he’d turned his attentions to her last night, and she was able to peel him out of it.

Seeing Jamie laying there had brought back memories. He had been naked and shivering when he was rescued from his ordeal with Black Jack. Claire took in a deep breath as the chill of the weeks following that rescue poured through her mind. A keen sense of loneliness swept over her. It was a feeling of loneliness she had experienced several times in the years without Jamie. It only lasted a moment this time as Claire reached out to touch Jamie’s forehead, felt once more that his fever seemed to be past, and released her deep breath with a sigh as he curled that little smile up one side of his face. Claire tucked herself in, sliding under the blanket she’d festooned Jamie with, and snuggled against his chest.

~~~~~

It was mid-morning before Jamie finally awoke. I’d fed Alex again, and had a light breakfast for myself. I’d also had time to mull over my return to work. I would not return to being the workaholic I had been. A portion of that was driven by my need to fill time. I had thought that once Brianna was off on her own, I would be left with an empty space that would need to be filled. Those plans changed the moment Jamie came back into my life. A new life opened up to me, but
that did not mean I was going to completely close the door on my old life. I fought hard to become a doctor – I had a calling I could not deny. I worked out a schedule that would allow me to give the proper treatment to my patients without sacrificing a home life. I even scheduled in some bonding time with Alex. I signed us up for parent/infant swim classes, and one day a week, I would take to the pool with my baby in tow, and join a number of other recent mothers from the hospital.

Upon taking Alex back to the bedroom for a diaper change, I found a zombie-like Jamie lumbering his way to the bathroom.

“Do you need help?” I asked.

“I can take a piss on my own,” he said tersely, then turned his head with the one-sided smile curling up his face, “Unless you really want your hands on me that badly, Sassenach,” he purred.

I smiled, feeling my cheeks burn and my lips begin to purse.

“Stay in there until I come so I can help you with a shower.”

“I canna stand that long – I just wish to crawl back to bed and hold the lad.”

“Jamie, you sweated through the sheets and blankets, and you were clammy and damp to the touch. You need to shower, and I need to change the bed before I hand him over. That’s the deal.”

Jamie nodded resignedly.

~~~~~

After getting Alex changed and placing him in his drawer, Claire stripped the bed down to the mattress and left the ball of fabrics in the corner for now. She very quickly redressed the bed with fresh linens, arranging the pillows from her side of the bed for Jamie to use, and taking his damp pillows and adding them to the pile of sweated items. She hoped that would be enough, and that finding a fresh blanket or two could wait until after she helped him with that shower.

Claire looked down at Alex. He was content. She smiled at his behavior. Claire felt confident in
leaving him for a few minutes.

She strode across the room and into the bathroom. Jamie was hugging the wall by the shower door, looking like a frog pasted to a window in a storm.

“I’ll get the water going for you,” Claire offered.

As she stood half in front of Jamie to adjust the temperature, he began to cling to her instead of the wall.

“I might need to you to keep me standing up, Sassenach.”

“Are you asking me to join you in there?” she replied.

“Aye,” he breathed in her ear as he inched her nightgown up.

“Alright, but we have to be quick about this. Alex is drowsing now, but who knows how long that will last.”

Jamie smiled and Claire could feel him nodding against her neck. She stripped off and helped Jamie into the water stream. He sighed as the warm water hit his skin, taking the layer of fever-born sweat out of his pores. He placed his hands on the wall on either side of the showerhead to steady himself while Claire soaped him up and wiped him down with a wash cloth. Her gentle touch soothed him almost as much as the water flowing over him.

“Stand in the water wi’ me,” Jamie requested, drawing Claire in front of himself as he was able to stand back from the wall.

He wrapped his arms around her torso.

“I would have my way wi’ ye if I could stand any longer,” Jamie purred.

Claire smiled at his ‘seductive reasoning’, knowing he meant it – both that he wanted her, and that
he was too weak to remain standing much longer. Claire did one more rinse of their bodies and shut the water off.

“Can you stand long enough for me to get your robe?” Claire asked.

“I’m not sure I can,” he told her, very much using clinging to her body as his means of staying upright.

Claire grabbed a towel in a fingertip reach and wrapped it around Jamie’s waist before maneuvering him onto the toilet lid. He wouldn’t let her walk away, holding her tautly around the waist, pulling her in tight against him. Claire got her hands on another towel and draped it over Jamie’s shoulders. She brought it up over his head and toweled his hair dry. She slowly dried her way down his face and shoulders and chest and back. Using that damp towel, she wiped the water drops off her own skin wherever Jamie wasn’t touching. Claire eased Jamie’s hands loose and leaned him back to let the wall support him for a moment while she finished drying herself.

Despite his weakened state, Jamie watched her appreciatively as she bent and twisted until even her toes were dry. It also brought home to Claire just how worn out Jamie still was – he didn’t even reach out, just smiled. She finished toweling Jamie off and got him back on his feet.

“Do you want to put something on, or just slip between the sheets?” Claire inquired.

“Just get me to the bed, and let me hold the lad.”

“As long as you promise to stay put.” “Aye,” Jamie nodded.

~~~~~

Jamie looked world weary, spent more than physically as he settled into the pillows and I pulled the covers over him. I knew there was only one thing he wanted right now. I bent down and collected Alex in my arms.

“Here he is,” I said as I placed our boy in the crook of Jamie’s arm, not knowing which of them I was speaking to at the moment.
Jamie took in and released a long, ragged breath, then leaned down and set his lips gently on the boy’s temple. He closed his eyes and several tears escaped down his cheeks.

“Alex,” he whispered.

I felt myself tearing up watching how emotional Jamie had become simply because he was holding his son. Alex snuggled against his chest, almost as happy to be held as Jamie was to be holding him.

I excused myself to the bathroom and cried.
Measure By Measure

Chapter Notes

Luckily I have a few chapters put to bed, because this month has been hell, and I have barely written a word, but have been able to tweak the next chapter to completion. My mom's been in the hospital, and now at a rehabilitation center to get her legs back under her after a bad reaction to an antibiotic and an infection trying to go/getting septic. Just being here online means I'm falling down on the job of getting the house in better order, but I will lose my mind if I don't take some time for positive activities right now. All this also means I've not been able to get to the library, and am agitating the hamster right now to keep my dial-up going (Yes, that is a joke!) I hope this chapter was worth waiting for - another one with some enjoyable bits, at least from my perspective. Hopefully, everything is headed in the right direction for the characters.

Measure By Measure

After a full day of enforced relaxation, Jamie was feeling better. He'd also had a full day of holding Alex, and that had been the best salve for his soul. I'd brought him tea at mid-afternoon, and a leftover bannock, but when I was in there for Alex's afternoon feeding, I could hear Jamie's stomach growling. At least that meant his appetite was back.

“Alright, you can have your parole, and a dinner not served on your lap,” I told him, getting an appreciative smile.

“He'll be joining us at the table soon,” Jamie said proudly, reaching out and running his hand down the back of Alex’s head.

“Yes, he will,” I proudly replied.

Jamie and I both giggled slightly as we smiled at each other, unable to contain our joyful feelings.

“I've read everything I can about modern ideas on starting a baby on solid foods – the ideology is all over the map.”
“It is,” I agreed, “But we'll find what works best for Alex.”

“Aye, but I don't want to be stuffing him like a haggis. I like the idea of Alex choosing how much he eats for himself – self-regulation I believe they call it.”

Alex finished nursing and let out a healthy burp as I patted his back.

“You read that article on baby lead weaning, didn't you?”

Jamie nodded as he looked down.

“Aye, it seems the most reasonable. He seems to know when he's drunk his fill, so why should that change when it comes to solid food?”

Jamie reached out for Alex, not having had enough of him even with a full day of holding him.

“I'm glad you think so,” I concurred as I handed Alex over to his keeping once again, “It's what I was about to recommend we try first. He's so pliable to our wishes so far, so I see no down side to trying.”

~~~~~

Dinners at the manse were once again happening at least two days a week with Brianna and Wake both coming with no excuses. Roger and Fiona didn't raise any questions to this seeming return to normalcy. They were just happy to see the thaw between them, hoping it meant the pair were on the road to fixing their rift.

“So there, Wren, we're having the next MacKenzie family music night this coming Sunday, and I expect you to bring your voice,” Roger charged Bree.

Brianna broke into a broad smile, and caught Wake smiling at her out of the corner of her eye. She nodded.
“I'll be here.”

“Good,” Roger said with a vehement nod, putting a hand over hers for a bit and giving it a squeeze.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“Jamie, this is Artemis Gordon. I've finished that highchair for young Alex. Would you find it an intrusion if I brought it to ye myself?”

“It would be an honor to welcome you to our home,” Jamie replied, getting a raised eyebrow from Claire.

“This afternoon will be fine,” Jamie continued, watching Claire's face take on a stern stare.

Jamie exhaled as he put down his phone.

“Artemis is bringing the highchair,” Jamie relayed with a smile.

Claire's face warmed instantly upon hearing the news.

“How sweet of him.”

“Aye,” Jamie nodded.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jamie was up the moment he heard the first rap, taking long strides to the door. I could hear their voices echoing in the foyer, and the sounds of our son's new highchair being placed on the floor. Alex was resting in his car seat here on the table when they came in, Jamie carrying the new seat. He placed it by the table where it would be between us as we ate. It was a simple raised seat, no tray. We'd be able to pull Alex right up against the table where he could watch us even if he wasn't eating with us.
“Mrs. Fraser,” Artemis said with a nod.

“Artemis...it's lovely,” I complimented.

He blushed.

“Och, well.”

It seems I embarrassed him with the appreciation. I completed his chagrin by placing a kiss on his cheek.

“Thank-you,” I offered after.

Jamie rescued the man from my attentions.

“Come, see the bed, see the room Brianna and I created with it!” Jamie excitedly suggested, Artemis agreeably following him to the Leoch room.

I heard a quite loud “oh, my” as our guest crossed into the room. It was quite some time before the pair returned. I'm sure Jamie showed him every nook and cranny of the room. As much as I would have wanted to join them, not only did I think Mr. Gordon needed the chance to get over my gratitude, but entering that room would make me long for it – long for an entire day and night of passion, no concerns other than one another. Jamie and I had found our connection once more, but intimate times with a baby in the house required a measure of control. The Leoch room was a bastion of wild abandon. We found each other, overcame the first of a million obstacles in that room's mirror image, and I knew if I were to enter that room right now, a spirit would overtake me, and I would want to relive the night that cemented our marriage to the exclusion of all else. I closed my eyes and remembered it all, my knees going weak as I felt a surge of heat from my nether regions.

I shook back to reality as I heard them coming up the stairs.

“Mrs. Fraser, I mean Claire, “ he corrected, clearly Jamie having reminded him, “There is a spirit about that room – I can see how it worked it's magic on the pair of you,” he relayed, coming to look at Alex more closely. “He's a lucky boy.”
Jamie and I both beamed smiles in Artemis' direction.

“We're the lucky ones,” Jamie finally replied after we just stood staring at Alex for a bit.

Meanwhile, from Alex's perspective I'm sure it looked like he was surrounded. He was looking from face to face, his expression shifting along with his gaze. I could see his lip starting to quiver. Alex didn't cry often, but whenever I saw that quiver, I could tell he was close to tears.

“Don't cry,” I said as I picked him up.

“That would be my fault,” Artemis concluded, “I haven't met a baby yet who didn't cry when I looked at him.”

“It's not entirely your doing,” I absolved him, “he's reached the stage where anyone other than mum and da makes him wary. I saw early signs of it at his last doctor's appointment – he has even done it to me, as he prefers his father's company to mine.”

“That's just a stage,” Artemis assured me.

I smiled, but in my heart I was pretty sure Alex would always be his father's son to a greater degree. But Jamie deserved an adoring son – a boy of his own blood who would know the level of love Jamie could give as a father.

“Jamie tells me Brianna is doing well in Scotland,” Artemis stated.

“For the most part,” I replied, “Some separation anxiety to begin with, and the ups and downs of being on one's own, getting her footing.”

“But the house is coming along nicely,” Jamie interjected, “Come, I'll show you,” he added excitedly, leading Mr. Gordon around the corner into the space in the foyer where the drawing table sat covered with Jamie's printouts of the photos Brianna had been routinely sending him.
Alex turned his head, following the movement as Jamie left the room. That lip began to quiver again, Alex once more on the verge of tears.

“Shh...shh...it's alright now,” I told Alex as I pulled him against my shoulder and rocked side to side.

He looked up at me, his mouth open, but his lip no longer projecting his feelings.

“Ahh,” he suddenly expelled.

“Ahh?” I replied, getting a small hand almost in my mouth.

I drew his hand away from my mouth, held it for a moment, then gave it a kiss, then buzzed my lips on the back of his hand. His eyes lit up and he smiled at me, surprised by the new sensation I had provided him.

~~~~~

Jamie literally walked Artemis through the reconstruction of Lallybroch using Brianna's plans and pictures. He was so happy to have another soul with whom to share both his ancestral home, and his pride in his daughter. I could hear it in his voice.

I held onto Alex as I did anything in the kitchen I could one-handed. Alex had become fixated on my lips after I buzzed his hand, and he was prying at my lower lip as I lowered the kettle into the sink to fill it. It would only be polite to invite Mr. Gordon to stay with us for tea, and to see Alex seated in the high chair for the first time. I could hold off nursing him for several hours yet.

Jamie came and peered around the corner when the kettle began whistling.

“I'm about to get coffee and tea steeping. Perhaps we could all sit for a while.”

Alex made another grab for my mouth and Jamie saw him, smirking at the whole predicament.

“Aye, I'll ask.”
We gathered around the table, Jamie and I on either side of Alex's new high chair, and Artemis seated across the table. I let Jamie do the inaugural landing of our son in his high chair.

“Well, there he is,” Artemis addressed Alex once he was seated. Alex was as bright-eyed as ever, bouncing slightly in his seat.

~~~~~

Bree arrived at the manse thinking she was a little early, but by the din that greeted her at the door, soon realized there was no such thing as ‘early’ to a MacKenzie song night. Fiona welcomed her in, and two of the youngest members of the family shortly ran across her toes, followed closely by Iona, who was meant to be minding them. Bree went up on her tip-toes and raised her arms, arching away from them to keep from being knocked down.

“Sorry!” Iona called back at Brianna as she tried to catch up with her charges.

Bree smiled and waved.

“Wow, is every member of the family here?” Bree inquired as she followed Fiona into the kitchen.

“Not quite all, but most.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Och, no, Brianna, you are a guest!”

“I can still make myself helpful.”

“No, you go on into the study, and warm up your voice.”

Before she got very far, Bree could hear notes being dabbled on a piano, and soon a pleasant voice taking up a tune.
“C’est moi! C’est moi, I’m forced to admit. ‘Tis I, I humbly reply. That mortal who these marvels can do, C’est moi, C’est moi, ‘tis I. I’ve never lost in battle or game; I’m simply the best by far.”

“You?” Brianna asked, greatly shocked upon seeing the voice belonged to Wake, and not only that, he was playing the piano as well – all without music in front of him.

“Wait…where did this piano come from – it’s not always here, is it?”

“It’s just usually covered with papers, Wren,” Roger offered, along with a welcoming kiss on the cheek.

As if on cue, Wake began tickling the ivories once more while Roger tuned up his voice with yet another tune from Camelot. Bree turned to watch him play, and Roger placed his hands on Bree’s shoulders while he sang.

“How to handle a woman? There’s a way, said the wise old man.”

Fiona came by just then, and Brianna managed to swap their places. Roger wrapped his arms appreciatively around his wife’s waist, having to bend quite far down to do so. Wake hadn’t stopped playing, but without missing a beat, once Roger had his wife held tightly to himself, he picked up how much of the song had elapsed, and launched correctly into, “How to handle a woman? Mark me well, I will tell you, sir. The way to handle a woman is to love her…simply love her…merely love her…love her…love her.”

Roger sighed then, leaning heavily upon Fiona’s shoulders, as if he was spent from expressing his passions.

“Alright, then,” Fee hummed, “I see you’re warmed up.”

Roger smiled at his wife lovingly, then looked up at Brianna.

“I would have serenaded you in a similar fashion, Wren, but any chance to show my wife I still love her, I will take.”
“Brianna,” Fiona suddenly emitted, “I think I know what job you can do tonight – you can be Wake’s page turner for the sheet music.”

Brianna gulped, momentarily taken unaware, leaving her vulnerable to Fiona who promptly positioned her on the bench next to Wake. Bree looked up at Fee as she found herself seated.

“If you think so,” Brianna hesitantly answered, then turned to look at Wake, a soft smile and micro-shrug aimed at him while he smiled back, wanting to inhale her very essence.

The sheet music appeared on the music stand as if from on high. In her nervous state, Brianna hadn’t noticed Jem placing the booklet on the piano.

“Should we try a test run?” Wake solicited, “Try turning a page, when I get to the bottom here, OK?”

Bree nodded demonstrably, and when Wake got to the last note on the page, she damn near punched him in the jaw trying to turn the page with her left hand. Wake corralled her hand before it could do any damage.

“I think you’ll have to use your other hand, or we’re likely to get tangled up.”

Bree nodded yet again, reluctantly shifting to sit even closer to Wake, her left hand gripping the bench directly behind Wake as her arm all but traced down his spine. It was the only way she could lean in far enough to reach the sheet music with her right hand. Each time she turned a page, her body brushed his. After a few test page turnings, Bree took a deep breath and asked, “Is this working OK…for you?”

“It sure is,” Wake replied, trying not to have a hint of anything in his voice.

He was in heaven. Before things got awkward, Jem launched into the middle of “I wonder what the king is doing tonight”, and Brianna leafed furiously through the pages to find where he was.

“You mean that a king who fought a dragon, whacked him in two and fixed his wagon, goes to be wed in terror and distress?, Yes!” Jem sang, joined by Roger on the final word, as he took up the
next verse.

“A warrior who’s so calm in battle, even his armor doesn’t rattle, faces a woman petrified with fright? Right!”

And with a subtle nod, Wake took up the next set of words, his voice nearly cracking several times as Bree was brushing on him, page turn after page turn.

“You mean that appalling clamoring, that sounds like a blacksmith hammering, is merely the banging of his royal knees? Please!”

Now all three of the assembled MacKenzie men harmonized.

“You wonder what the king is up to tonight? He’s wishing he was in SCOTLAND fishing tonight.” (They all yelled Scotland)

“What occupies his time while waiting for the bride? He’s searching high and low for some place to hide!”

They broke into laughter, the singing abruptly coming to an end. The levity caught Bree off-guard and caused her to smile and laugh a bit herself.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen this side of any of you – you’re incorrigible! Does my mom know what kind of people she’s left me with?”

“Aye, she does, lass,” Roger quickly replied, “And I’d hazard a guess you’re just like us if you let down that guard of yours.”

“And it’s not just the men in our clan who can be bawdy,” Wake began, turning to look in Brianna’s eyes, but found himself struck silent, as he found her looking back at him just as intently.

Janet skipped in from the kitchen launching into, “Tra la! It’s May! The lusty month of May! That lovely month when ev’ryone goes blissfully astray. Tra la! It’s here! That shocking time of year, when tons of wicked little thoughts merrily appear!”
“Wait!” a voice Brianna didn’t immediately recognize piped up, “That’s mine! You said you’d hold it for me!”

It was Jem’s wife, Ruth. She jostled Janet and leaned back against her husband as she reached the piano, and the two women launched together into the next chorus.

“Tra la! It’s May! The lusty month of May! That darling month when ev’ryone throws self-control away. It’s time to do a wretched thing or two, and try to make each precious day one you’ll always rue! It’s May It’s May! The month of ‘yes you may’, the time for ev’ry frivolous whim, proper of ‘im’.”

The two women degenerated into laughter as well. Bree wished she could just let go, but with all the frivolity, there was this undertow of sexual innuendo. And while it in no way bothered Bree, and she actually quite enjoyed that kind of humor, she didn’t feel like she could openly participate. She didn’t want other people thinking she knew more than she really did, and if she said something, it could easily be misconstrued.

Bree was starting to look like a deer in the headlights, and Wake could sense her distress.

“My fingers need a break,” Wake announced. “Should we get something to drink?” he asked Brianna.

“Um, yeah.”

Wake escorted Bree to the kitchen. They smiled nervously at each other in turn as they hydrated. Bree was looking at Wake, trying to figure out what was bothering her mind when it dawned on her.

“Oh, God, why did it take me so long to notice - What happened to your beard?” she asked, noticing the dimple on the right side of his face for the first time as his smile overtook his face.

“Oh, well, I was giving it a trim, and next thing I know, it was gone,” Wake answered her as he shook his head, as if in disbelief himself. “Besides, the Winter's almost done.”

“You only have a beard in the Winter?” Brianna questioned.
“For the most part, aye, and sometimes I have one merely out of laziness – but it was time for this one to go.”

“Do you have a favorite? From Camelot, I mean?” Wake asked, changing the topic as he turned one of the kitchen chairs around and sat on it backward.

“Seems like you have to make reservations to get the song you want,” Bree voiced, trying to keep things light.

“I’m sure they’ll make an exception for you,” he offered. “Um…Bree…I was wondering-”

“Wake, you’ve had enough time to drink all of Loch Ness by now!” Janet yelled.

“I guess…we should go back in,” Wake relayed.

“You were saying something…before…”

She looked hopefully at him.

“Nah, it’ll…keep,” he hesitated. “Shall we?” Wake inquired, signaling toward the study.

Bree nodded, but when Wake stopped looking at her, she rolled her lips into her mouth, sure Wake had started to say something, and wondering why he would defer.

“Bree, why don’t you pick out a song?” Fiona asserted. “You have such a lovely voice.”

“Um…I guess.”

“Told you,” Wake spoke quickly into her ear, sitting quickly back on the piano bench.
Bree went to the sheet music and turned to a page, confidently placing it on the stand open to the song of her choosing. She nodded to Wake to start him off and he began playing. She was too nervous to sit, but stood looking at the music, and Wake out of the corner of her eye, as she placed a supporting hand on the piano. The room fell silent of other voices.

“St. Genevieve, St. Genevieve, it’s Guenevere! Remember me? St. Genevieve, St. Genevieve, I’m over here, beneath this tree. You know how faithful and devout I am. You must admit I’ve always been a lamb. But Genevieve, St. Genevieve – I won’t obey you any more, you’ve gone a bit too far! I won’t be bid and bargained for, like beads at a bazaar. St. Genevieve, I’ve run away, eluded them and fled, and from now on I intend to pray to someone else instead!”

Bree got wrapped up in the emotions and lost her place in the song for a moment, catching up as she heard the familiar refrain of the chorus begin.

“Where are the simple joys of maidenhood? Where are all those adoring, daring boys? Where’s the youth pining so for me? He leaps to death in woe for me? Oh, where are a maiden’s simple joys?”

Bree went on, finishing the song with her powerful voice and a flourish of movements copied directly from the movie she knew so well. She had gone into a world of her own, completely absorbed by the freedom she felt as she sang. The endorphin rush lasted until the applause stopped, and suddenly Bree felt embarrassed that she had gone into her ‘Broadway’ mode.

She quickly sat on the piano bench and looked down at her own toes, her hands clutching each other so tightly her fingertips were turning white.

“Now, that’s a performance worthy of making you a part of the family,” Roger gushed, “But I think it’s time to bring the young ‘uns in.”

All but Brianna and Wake started heading out of the room. Bree leaned back against the piano and Wake turned toward her.

“So, earlier…in the kitchen…Bree, I was wondering - ”

“Bree, we could use an extra pair of hands,” Janet’s voice rang out.

Bree gave Wake a sad smile and followed the commanding voice. When she reached the kitchen,
Brianna saw Fiona giving her older daughter a little swat and an admonishing finger.

“You mean he still hasn’t…?” Janet cut herself off after seeing Brianna was close enough to hear.

“Bree, you just go back, we doona need you,” Fiona stressed, trying to send the young Fraser back into the study.

“You’re sure?” Bree questioned.

“Like I said when ye got here, you’re a guest!” Fiona insisted.

Brianna shrugged her shoulders apologetically toward Janet, and walked back into the study, just slightly confused about what just took place.

“They sent me back,” she told Wake. “I think I’m being hazed.”

Wake laughed.

~~~~~

The parade of children began. Iona came into the study with the two who had nearly run Bree down earlier, Abigail's two older children, Sam and James. Gem came back to the room holding Sage, his and Ruth’s youngest, while Abigail was toting her youngest, Michael. All others were ambulatory on their own.

Brianna was glad to have the piano bench to sit on after seeing how the room filled in. Roger finally reentered the room, making a beeline to the far side of the fireplace, pulling his guitar case out of its hiding place. The hum of an amplifier was soon boosting the volume of Roger's strings as he warmed up his fingers, and made the guitar talk.

People Bree hadn't seen since her parent's wedding were coming out of the woodwork, and she really didn't know any of them. One came in wearing a bass guitar strapped over his shoulder, and a bodhran was now perched atop the piano, waiting for someone to wield it and set the rhythm. Roger was getting into his guitar playing, closing his eyes as he rapidly ran through a series of
“Careful, Da, remember what happened last time,” Wake warned.

“That’s right,” Gem interjected, “No Hendrix impressions this time – you were lucky the ice worked on your knees.”

“And the heating pad on you back, Roger,” Fiona remembered, shaking her head.

Briana smirked as she turned around on the piano bench to look at Roger.

“I got carried away...showin' off for the kids,” Roger admitted with a shrug.

Bree held back a laugh. Fiona took the baby from Abigail and cradled him in her arms, and Abigail took up the bodhran as she took up her place around the piano. The way she interacted with the man with the bass, Bree was pretty sure he was her husband, Duncan Strachan. She knew she’d been introduced to everyone at her parent's wedding, or at the reception when she wasn't hiding out, but she wasn't in the best head space then, and it only got worse in the following weeks.

This was a new experience for Brianna. As an only child until recently, Bree could only marvel at the family she saw around her. The interactions, inside jokes, and friendly teasing moved about her like fireworks -bright little explosions happening all around her. Bree's smile at Wake telegraphed to him how overwhelming his family could be in a group.

“So on your fash, lass,” Wake told her, “You hold your own with the workers, this family is no different.”

Bree let out a breath and nodded nervously.

“If you say so – but I hope nobody tries to hand me a baby to hold.”

“You don't like babies?” he said incredulously.
“I like them fine, at a distance.”

Wake tilted his head.

“Even with that new brother of yours?”

Bree shook her head 'no'.

“Well, this is the way the MacKenzie family does things – a free pair of hands gets a baby. I thought I'd escaped it, being the youngest, but then Gem started having kids, and then Janet, and they thought it was more than fair to have me hold their babies, as they held me when I was that size. But, Mam gave you a job for the night, so I doubt anyone will try to enlist you to hold a bairn.”

“I hope not,” Bree responded, sounding apprehensive.

“Stick with me, and you'll be fine,” Wake tried to reassure Bree.

~~~~~

The music of the night was a mix of classic songs, some more recent hit songs the kids liked, and several traditional pieces, during which Janet took up her fiddle. Roger had made sure each of his and Fiona's children had had music in their lives – and it had stuck for most of them. Music had always been one of Roger's great pleasures, and he hoped that was true for his children as well.

People came and went from the study, slipping in and out of the kitchen for drinks and snacks, or just to have a break from it all. Bree only left the piano bench one more time during the night, fearing she would lose her place to sit, and therefore her job as page turner, and that someone would shove a baby into her lap.

Bree found herself waiting for the bathroom, and was approached by Iona, Skye, and Arran, the three eldest children of Gem. Bree nodded at each of them.

“Bree?” Iona finally said, “I've wanted to ask...is there some reason you didna wish to come out
with us when you were in Scotland for your parents' wedding? We...”

“I... was in a bit of a whirlwind – a lot happened in those weeks...and...um...until recently, I've had...um...I guess you’d call it a social phobia. I’m starting to get better. I never meant to...I just couldn't. I hope you all can understand. I've always been a bit of a loner, I guess. I've only ever had one or two close friends even, and not at the same time. I didn't mean to seem stand-offish.”

Skye nodded shyly, acting as if she understood completely.

“Skye's our loner,” Arran offered.

“I am not,” she refuted, “I'm introspective – ask Gran-da!”

“Maybe we can make up for it,” Bree offered, “When I get Lallybroch done, I should have some time on my hands until I find my next project. I'll take you all out to eat – my treat, and we can get to know each other, if you'd like.”

They all looked quite pleased at the invitation, nodding and smiling.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings – I was pretty screwed up for a while.”

~~~~~

As the night went on, the four youngest children started blinking out. Three of those children belonged to Abigail, so she and her husband started wrapping them up to leave, which meant half the band was leaving. Roger gave each wee one a kiss.

“You need any help getting them out to the car?” he asked.

“Now that the bigger two are walking, we can manage,” Abigail replied, the youngest one in her arms.

Roger leaned in and gave is daughter a kiss on the forehead.
“Alright, then. goodnight. Duncan, great on the bass once again, You two make a fine rhythm section.”

Duncan gave him a smirk as he headed to the door.

It was pretty clear the music was wrapping up. Bree watched as Ruth leaned on Gem's shoulder.

“It's been a long day, reverend,” she toned, “And a busy one. I canna keep my feet much longer.”

“Aye, and tomorrow is a school day,” Gem bemoaned.

It was clear music night was important to every member of this family. Janet came to rest on the arm of Fiona's chair, smiling down at Sage in her grandmother's arms.

“This is the most we've gathered for a music night in some time. Too bad we couldna have done this over the holidays when Ginny and Robert were about, but father wanted Brianna here.”

Janet's words hit Brianna's ears like a bullet, and Wake felt the impact.

“Excuse me?” Wake said turning on the bench, “She's sitting right here, sister. Just because you have two at university who couldna be here is no reason to be rude.”

Bree stayed silent and kept her back to this confrontation, feeling like she had fallen into the middle of a disputed point.

“Janet,” Roger gained her attention with, “both Ginny and Robert could have made themselves available tonight – neither is more than a train ride away.”

Ruth approached Brianna and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Your voice is angelic,” Ruth commended, her voice conciliatory, “I still find it hard to believe
I’ve known you since you were a bairn. It feels like it was only a few years ago.”

“Aye,” Gem added, coming over to stand next to his wife, “I remember it like it was yesterday as well.”

Bree looked up and smiled finally.

“I only remember bits and pieces from before we left for Boston. I have a distinct image of a play room. I remember stacking blocks, and then somebody plowing them over.”

“Guilty as charged,” Wake burred, leaning in behind her ear.

Brianna looked over her shoulder and gave Wake a sly look.

“Ye always were a destructive wee gomeral,” Janet quipped, “I remember the time – “

“Not again,” Wake called, jumping to his feet.

His outburst woke Sage. Fiona tried to shush her, get her settled back down, but she’d been jarred from her slumber. Ruth moved to quiet her youngest, and it drew Janet’s attention as well. Wake perched on the edge of the bench and leaned back in to whisper in Brianna’s ear.

“You might want to get while the getting is good. I’ll cover your retreat.”

She looked once more over her shoulder and nodded slightly to him. Bree spun on the bench and Wake took her hand and they made the dash out of the study. They were laughing as they reached the outside door, Bree backed against the wall, Wake standing all but against her. The draw between them was palpable, but they shied once more from one another.

Wake handed Bree her coat, standing guard as she slipped it on to make sure no one cut off her escape, or lured her back in.

~~~~~
Wake escorted Brianna out of the old manse before too many childhood stories could spill out.

“My transport is only twenty feet from the house. I could have gotten here on my own.”

“I know…it’s just…I was wondering…Oh hell – Bree, will you go out to dinner with me tomorrow night?”

“Sure,” Brianna quickly replied.

Wake continued to prattle, “Nothing fancy…just the pub. We could go straight from work…”

His eyes searched hers and saw her smile.

“I. Said. YES.” Bree emphasized.

“Oh. Alright then,” he said, relieved of his whole night’s anxiety and thwarted chances.

“Do you think you’ll need to shower and change? I know you’re familiar with the facilities,” Brianna teased, evoking his naked exit from her bathroom months earlier.

“I promise to keep my indecent exposure to a minimum.”

Bree laughed.

“Deal.”

Wake opened her door for her and even closed it once she was in. She quickly turned the key and opened the driver’s side window.
“Tell Roger I’m glad he wouldn’t let me out of the family sing-along night…And that I’m looking forward to the next one.”

“Will do.” Wake tucked his fingers into his pockets as he watched Bree pull away from the curb.

He sucked in a big breath and released it as a smile crept up his cheeks. His heart flittered oddly in his chest.

~~~~~

As the work day came to a close, Wake made himself scarce. He didn’t want to have to beg off from an invitation from one of the men only to show up at the pub with Brianna. There was going to be enough talk just from the pair of them being seen together in a non-work context. For a moment Wake wondered if he’d made a mistake – not in asking Bree out – he hated himself for not doing that sooner – but for choosing the pub. He didn’t want to intimidate or overwhelm the lass with some upscale restaurant – nor could he afford it just now.

Bree found him inside the tower checking on where the beams went through the walls to make sure they hadn’t damaged the mortar with the tight-fitting tenons that had to be finessed into place.

“Wake?” she asked as she peered around the doorway.

“Aye?” he snapped.

His eyes were wide in the shock of being found unaware. Bree read his expression and put him at ease.

“Weapons down – it’s only me,” she joked, “Everyone else has left, so you can stop hiding in here.”

“Hidin? I’m not…OK…I kinda am. I just didna want…anything to get in the way of tonight.”

Bree blushed slightly.
“Well, you can come down to the house whenever you’re ready…um…but knock on the bathroom door in case I’m still in there.”

Wake nodded as he bit his lip. As soon as Brianna was out of sight, Wake fell against the tower wall as his eyes rolled up into his head.

~~~~~

Wake grabbed a duffel bag from under the passenger side seat of his truck and made his way into the house.

“Bree?” he called out as he came through the door, but he got no reply.

He slowly and carefully climbed to the second floor. Bree emerged from the bathroom in a puff of steam. Had she been wearing a light colored robe, it would have blended in, but the navy terry cloth showed through the cloud.

“Bathroom’s all yours,” she offered, “And the Laird’s room, such as it is, is there if you need a less steamy room to get dressed in.”

They stood to either side of the bathroom door, Bree with her hand on the knob while Wake rested his left hand on top of the door. With his right hand, Wake gently wrapped on the door, knocking, as she’d asked. They both smiled as they lingered in each other’s gaze.


Bree dropped her head down then looked back up into Wake’s face. He slipped behind the door.

Bree dashed off up the stairs to her room. She still hadn’t decided what she was wearing, and it had her in a bit of a panic. She tore through her closet, piles of clothing sitting in the middle of her bed as she narrowed her choices.
“Casual…but classy. I don’t want to look like I’m trying too hard,” she spoke to herself in the mirror, “and I don’t want to be too cold, or bundled up like a mummy.”

She heard the water shut off, knowing Wake was catching up, and that he already had an outfit picked out. Bree closed her eyes and shoved one hand each into a pants pile and a shirt pile.

“OK, black leggings, white Oxford…” she looked into her closet once more, spotting a beloved sky blue sweater that she’d manage to shrink in a laundry mishap, but that still fit…tightly.

She threw it on, coquettishly admiring herself as the sweater accentuated her bosom and slim waist. Bree heard Wake taking the stairs down, and knew she was out of time. This was what she was going to wear. She picked out the dressy black boots she’d been waiting to wear, and made her way down the stairs to join Wake.

She saw him pacing at the foot of the stairs, tugging on his hands as he tried to control his nerves.

The new boots tapped out a pattern as she came down to the floor. Wake turned to face her, and his mouth dropped open. She was wearing her hair down. He licked his lips. They scanned each other, almost laughing – Bree was wearing black pants and a sky blue top, and he was wearing sky blue faded jeans and a black shirt.

“Should I go back up and change?” Brianna asked upon seeing their upside down twin wardrobes.

“Don’t you dare,” Wake exclaimed, taking each of Bree’s wrists into his hands for a moment.

“I just mean…it’s fine,” he breathily said, releasing her wrists.

That sweater did something for her her work clothes did not, and it did something for him, to be sure.

“Ready?” she asked, seeing how transfixed his gaze had become.

“Aye,” he sighed, reaching his right hand out to her.
She brushed her hand in and out of his, skimming by him and looking over her shoulder to see his reaction. He was at her heels, and then a step ahead of her so he could open the door for her, and precede her to the truck.

~~~~~~

The pub was lively and loud as Wake held the door open for Brianna to go in ahead of him. The bar was swarming, in part with some of the men who were working on Lallybroch.

“Head straight back,” Wake instructed, conducting the pair of them to a booth that was as far from the bar as possible.

“Here, this one,” Wake confirmed, placing his hand on her back to guard her as she took her seat.

He took the step and a half needed to reach the other side of the table, and slid in opposite Bree.

“So…hungry?” Wake asked with a nod.

“As a matter of fact, I’m starving,” she answered.

Wake signaled the waitress over to their table.

“Burgers OK?” Wake leaned to ask so she could hear him over the din of the darts game adjacent to their table.

“Sounds fine – no cheese, though,” Brianna almost had to yell back to be heard.

Wake nodded quite demonstratively.

“Two burgers, no cheese,” Wake began the order, putting up two fingers to emphasize.
“Well done?” Wake asked Bree and she nodded.

Wake turned back to the waitress and reiterated, “Well done, and I’ll have a draught…Bree! What’ll you drink?”

“Can I get a root beer?” Bree turned her head up and asked the waitress, “Root beer.”

The waitress nodded.

“It’s really getting loud,” Bree observed.

“I know, sorry about that. It should calm down once they’ve found a winner at darts.”

Four men about Wake’s age made their way past the booth Bree and Wake were seated at, each one giving his shoulder a shove as they went by.

“You know them, I hope?” Brianna queried.

“That’s most of my roommates,” he replied.

“Most?” she incredulously answered.

“It’s just a place to hang m’ hat, really. I’m hardly ever there.”

In the distance, Brianna swore she heard the word ‘Sassenach’ being thrown around by the darts players, and she knew for a fact they were looking at her. She was getting uncomfortable and Wake could see it.

“Should we leave?” Wake humbly asked.
“We’ve already ordered, and I don’t run just because I’m in unfamiliar territory,” she brightly retorted, knowing he wouldn’t know her reference, nobody would truly understand it other than her father, but it made her feel bold and empowered.

“Hey, MacKenzie, up for a game tonight?” one of the players called out.

Wake flicked his hand at them dismissively, scowling at the interruption. It should have been the end of it, but the dart playing jackals sensed weakness, and approached their booth.

“Well, if you doona want a go tonight, how about your Sassenach boss?”

Wake shook his head subtly at her in warning, but she touched his fingers on the table and smiled politely.

“I’ve never played before, but I’ll try my hand at it. You just aim for the center, right?”

The laughter circled the bar as she stood, pulled her sweater down, and took a few long-legged steps into the dart area. One of the men handed her four little yellow missiles.

“Here ye go, lass,” he hooted.

One by one, Bree took the darts, sized up her target, and threw them into the center of the dart board. As each one sank home, a gasp rose, and when the last one took root in the cork, a roar of delight rose momentarily. Bree didn’t stay for either disbelief or accolades, just retook her seat like she was returning from the restroom, refreshed and happy to see Wake across the table. He stared at her, dumbfounded.

“How…?”

“I was an all-state archer, and then my dad taught me to throw knives. I figured it couldn’t be all that different – you aim, you release,” she said with the hunch of her shoulders. “Oh, good, they brought my drink,” she commented, taking a sip. “Oh, that’s really good,” she said, taking another drink.
Wake walked Brianna to the front door of her house as they continued to talk. When the conversation didn’t show any signs of waning, Bree sat on the steps and looked up at Wake, silently inviting him to join her. Words just came flowing out of them, no matter how ridiculous the conversation was becoming; they were afraid to let it stop. But finally, there was a lull, and just as they both feared, restarting the stalled conversation proved impossible.

“It’s getting late,” Wake finally said, permeated with sadness, as he rose to his feet.

He stretched a bit after so long sitting on the stone steps. Bree was quickly on her feet as well, nervously standing just inches from Wake.

“Goodnight, then, Bree.”

Before she knew what she was doing, Brianna had slipped her arms around Wake’s neck, hugging him tight as she murmured, “I really enjoyed tonight.”

Feeling that she wasn’t pulling away after a quick embrace, his arms criss-crossed around her lower back and clung tightly, pressing them together. His mind flashed back to holding her tight to warm her up after he’d found her by the mill. She needed no such warming tonight.

Bree realized she’d been holding him for longer than what a friendly hug should be, but now she didn’t know how to end it without making it awkward, and Wake was showing no inclination of letting her go, either. It was reminiscent of the day they met to Brianna, too. The warm, tingling feeling making her want to just stay right there, locked in Wake’s arms.

They suddenly stood in complete darkness as they’d been immobile so long the motion-detector for the yard lights thought light was no longer needed. They both puffed a stifled laugh, Bree knowing she’d been given a graceful exit, and Wake knowing ‘a sign’ when it made itself known. They slowly disengaged.

“Maybe…we could…do it again - the dinner I mean,” Bree quickly clarified, the lights snapping back on as they stepped back from each other.

“Oh, aye…you do know that by morning everyone will know of your dart throwing prowess?”
“I guess…news travels fast when an Outlander does something around here.”

“You are not an Outlander – you were born Scottish. It just took ye a while to come home.”

They left it on that note, Wake happily ambling to his truck while Brianna floated into the house.

~~~~~
Bree hadn’t slept at all, but she didn’t mind. She’d been on such a high after her ‘date’ with Wake, sleep was not about to enter the picture. Bree happily greeted Wake at the door when he arrived the next morning. She was glowing.

“Looks like you got about as much sleep as I did,” he commented.

Brianna smiled and hummed a happy affirmative tone.

“Does it show?” she asked.

“Not in a bad way,” Wake replied.

They looked away from each other, each letting out a deep breath as quietly as possible. The feeling of delight they had at the end of the night was lingering this morning. They’d ambled through the house to the study and stepped up to the drawing table.

“Can you believe it’s been near on a year since I got the permits to begin work here?” Wake mused.

“That’s right, it was Valentine’s night you Skyped me with that news.”
“Aye. Do ye have Valentine’s plans this year?”

“Nope.”

“Then perhaps we should…have that celebratory dinner we discussed last year.”

“I’d like that,” Bree replied softly.

“I believe Alex is cutting his first tooth,” I announced.

Alex had been fussing all night, not letting Jamie get any recuperative sleep after his fevered night. I had taken Alex to quiet him, hoping a little extra time at the breast would resolve his fussiness.

“Did he bite ye?” Jamie groggily asked, turning over and plowing his face into the pillows.

“Not yet, but I believe we’re in for some sleepless nights now.”

“I doona suppose you’d be of a mind to put some whisky on his gums,” Jamie offered.

“Only as a last resort,” I replied, “There are products available that will soothe his pain without giving him a buzz. It also means we are not far off from getting this boy started on solids, so Artemis’ timing was spot on.”

“Aye, next time I go to the market I’ll pick up some of the early foods that were recommended – I think I’ll go organic for those – and perhaps we should consider that for ourselves. Back in the day when fertilizer was provided by cows and sheep, you might get the occasional illness, but I’ve been reading those medical journals of yours, and the possibility of hormonal or metabolic changes from chemicals-“

“A frightening prospect, I know…Jamie, there’s been something on my mind we need to discuss.”
“Is this about you going back to work?”

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

“Doona worry yourself, I’ve always known you had a calling – it would have been so if you’d been able to stay and raise Brianna wi’ me. You’d ha’ had me take the lass until you’d helped ev’ry suffering person. At least now I know you’re doing it in safe, clean surroundings, and you’ll come and go at predictable hours.”

I smiled.

“You still amaze me,” I began, “Not only the way you can read me, but how you can understand what men born nearly three centuries later are still struggling with – that women know their own minds, and bodies, and how best to satisfy both.”

“I’ve had a long time to learn it.”

“But you understood it even then, after a time,” I complimented.

“Well, I had an unusual woman to teach me, and she taught me well…in many topics.”

Jamie’s look made me blush.

~~~~~~

Alex was back in good spirits come the morning light. Jamie sat him in the high chair to get him used to it. He watched us eating with great fascination. Food was tracked moving from plate to mouth. I made the mistake of placing my teaspoon within Alex’s reach, and the next thing I knew we were listening to it rattle its way to the floor. I made sure to keep my cup and plate at a safe distance. I picked the spoon off the floor and offered it back to Alex to play with. He pressed his hand into the bowl of the spoon, the handle lifting off the table surface, and then clanging down when he released it.
“Mam?” Wake called out, sound of alarm in his voice as he entered the kitchen, “I need your help.”

“Clearly, now calm down and tell me what’s got ye in a twist,” Fiona shot back.

“Bree and I are to be going out to dinner Wednesday night, but I canna find a place that’s not booked solid.”

“Valentine’s night?” Fiona inflected with keen interest.

“That’s why there’s no place available – and it’s no like that…it’s been a year since I got the permits to start working on Lallybroch – it’s a commemorative dinner to celebrate how far we’ve come.”

Fiona nodded slowly, cat that ate the canary smile on her face.

“I see…so…how can I help ye?”

“I thought maybe I’d cook for her, but…that seems…almost too personal, but…if I, or you, made something in advance, brought it for us to share – do you know what she eats? What should I make? Have ye got any ideas?”

I rolled a play mat out on the floor in front of the doors to the bluestone patio. It was a nice sunny spot to sit with Alex. I had the blocks Bree had sent for Christmas, and we settled in for some playtime while Jamie was doing the shopping. I placed Alex between my legs sitting facing out, the blocks just beyond us. I stacked some of the square blocks up pyramid fashion, using Alex’s hand to put the blocks in place.

“See, you place it so half of the block is supported by the one below it on the left, and the other half is supported by the one on the right. Yes, that’s called a running bond if you’re installing tile or brick– your big sister taught me that. She knows a lot of interesting things. But she’s all grown
now – an adult in her own right, dealing with adult problems, and not letting me in to help. I miss her.”

Alex reached out for one of the blocks, pulling it out of the middle of the stack, sending everything above it cascading down to the play mat, much to his delight. The sound was almost musical as they landed, hitting each other and the other shapes of block from the set.

“Oh,” I reacted, but I smiled, not wanting Alex to think that knocking over the blocks was wrong - just as much could be learned in knocking them down as in building them up.

Alex turned and looked up at me. I leaned down to him and nuzzled him, clearing the blocks out of the way, and turning him to place him on his back. I pulled up and interlaced my legs around him, incorporating our yoga stretches into playtime.

“Have you had enough of the blocks?” I brightly asked, watching Alex’s face light up as I spoke to him.

I took his hands and softly clapped them together in a rhythmic manner, sets of two and three claps alternately. I held onto his hands and pulled him to a seated position, bending over and touching my nose to his. That’s when Jamie came in, announcing himself.

“Da’s home,” he called.

Alex reacted to his voice, squeaking a happy tone.

“Over here,” I called out in reply.

“Stay put, I’ll join ye in a moment.”

Jamie brushed the blocks together to give himself a place to sit, veeing his legs out to form a corral between us. I picked Alex up by the armpits and turned him toward Jamie, making it look like our seven month old was walking toward him, shifting him side to side to imitate the movement until I extended him into Jamie’s hands. Jamie continued to shift him in imitation walking until he had gotten him close enough to just pull him into a hug.
“Any more teething today?” Jamie asked.

“His mouth has been sensitive, and he’s been a bit of a gloomy Gus. That’s why I broke out the blocks. I thought maybe I could distract him. It’s worked for the most part.”

“Och, my boy – did he enjoy the blocks?”

“He enjoyed knocking them over.”

Jamie looked up at me and smiled.

“Who wouldn’t?” Jamie whispered as he leaned toward me.

“I got a good assortment of fruits and vegetables for Alex to try out. I thought maybe we’d start out with the ones that don’t need to be cooked.”

“What kind of apples did you get,” I inquired.

“Braeburn, I hope they’re acceptable.”

“I’ve always been more partial to the MacIntosh, or granny smith, but those are probably too tart to start him out on.”

“Aye, don’t want to pucker his face permanently,” Jamie joked.

I sighed, taking in the sight of Jamie holding his son. The only thing left to bother my mind was Brianna’s distance – not that she was in Scotland, the emotional distance. She would not have just gone off for the holidays the way she did if something hadn’t happened. If I had been able to look her in the eyes, she would not have been able to hide whatever was troubling her. But I had to accept what she told me – David invited her to Amsterdam, and she enjoyed the time they spent together.

Perhaps it was a spur of the moment decision; I just wonder what spurred it.
It was Valentine’s Day. There was an excited feeling in the pit of Brianna’s stomach as she thought about the year prior – unconsciously flirting with Wake over Skype. Wake had remembered it, too. So, was dinner tonight Bree and Wake’s second date, or just a commemoration? Brianna didn’t know, but she was going to take today like any other day, because when she anticipated where things would go, it hadn’t gone.

Wake parked extra close to the house when he arrived, Bree hearing and being alarmed by the near proximity of his truck. As she reached the door, Wake was headed her way, laden down with two glass baking dishes with lids, and a tote bag.

“Thanks for getting the door,” he said as he skimmed by her and paced into the kitchen.

“What’s all this?” Bree questioned, coming around the corner as Wake was loading the glass pans into the lower shelf of Brianna’s fridge.

“Tonight’s dinner,” Wake replied.

Brianna tilted her head and placed a hand on her hip.

“I did try to find us a place to have dinner tonight, but the town is booked solid because of the holiday.”

“We could have just gone to the pub again,” she pointed out.

“Aye, well, I thought of that. I went in there to see if they were expecting a crowd – turns out they’re having a speed dating event for valentine singles, and I didna think you wanted to be thrown into the middle of that.”

Brianna smiled.

“No – God no,” Bree answered, raising her head and shaking it to the heavens.
“So, Mam gave me a hand with this – we just have to heat it up.”

“A mercy meal from your mom?” Bree asked.

“Not exactly, but I didna want to cancel on you last minute. Is this OK?”

“Why not? It’s…good out of the box thinking.”

Wake nodded and exhaled in relief.

“Alright then,” he said after a quick breath in.

Wake finished placing the glass pans and then also took the tote bag and put its contents into the fridge as well, using the door to block Brianna from seeing what was going into cold storage.

“Can you let it be a surprise?” he requested.

Brianna smirked.

“I’ll try.”

~~~~~

With much of the work shifting to the Laird’s room and the North room, a lot more of the men were inside the house during work hours. Bree was continuing to work with Wake to get the fireplaces refurbished, so there was very little time left to snoop, and she began to put it out of her mind as soon as she and Wake started working.

Along with several other strong-armed men, Brianna and Wake were able to get the lintel from the North room replaced. It had taken a while to find the right piece of wood.
“Thanks, lads,” Wake dismissed their extra help, letting the carpenters get back to what they were best at.

They both nodded as they left the room.

“How is it that the North room is larger than the Laird’s room? Shouldn’t the Laird have had the biggest suite?” Wake asked Brianna once they were alone again.

“The Laird’s room was bigger. I incorporated the gallery into the north room – you tore out the original rooms before I even got here – how do you not know this?”

“I was supervising at the time. I didn’t do the actual tear-out on every room!” he retorted.

“No, but you’ve gone over the plans enough!” Brianna said, shaking her head incredulously.

“I hadn’t really thought about it until I was in the two rooms so much…But I guess the real question should be what will your Da think? Will he want the North room because it is bigger, or the Laird’s room?”

“Well, I hope he wants the Laird’s room, because I redesigned the North room for me!” Brianna enthused.

Wake smiled back at her revelation.

~~~~~

The mood had been light and playful between Wake and Brianna all day, and the fireplace in the North room all but completed by the end of the day’s work.

“After the mortar is fully dry, we’ll give ‘er a test run – make sure you know how high the flames can get without setting the new lintel alight,” Wake offered with a smirk.
“I’m not sure how often each of these fireplaces will get used, but it’s good to know there’s back-up if the power goes out again.”

Bree turned her gaze from the fireplace to the newly acquired square footage of the North room.

“Something?” Wake asked, seeing her far-away look.

“I’m beginning to wonder if I should have put a half bath into this room, and made the other second floor bathroom exclusive to the Laird’s room – but there’s no way to link the other bathroom to anything other than the hall entrance it has, so….”

“Doona second guess yourself, lass,” Wake encouraged.

Bree snapped out of her thoughts.

“You’re right. I can’t play that game forever. I drew up the plans, and so far everything has worked out. I just have to have the confidence of my convictions.”

Bree walked over to the window and looked out.

“It’s almost dark. I didn’t think it was that late,” Bree commented, turning to look over her shoulder.

“I’ll get cleaned up then, and get our meal in to warm up, if you’re still OK with it?” Wake carefully inquired.

“I’m starving. I haven’t been near the fridge all day since you asked me not to ‘snoop’.”

“Och, well, I believe this meal will make up for any starvation you’ve incurred. Why don’t you wash up up here, and I’ll go down to that wee bathroom ye’ve tucked into the kitchen and get everything going.”

Brianna nodded, and they parted company so each could remove mortar splotches and stone dust.
“Good thing I packed a spare shirt,” Wake grumbled into the mirror, seeing all the splotches that had no intention of cleaning off easily. He stripped it off, t-shirt now exposed while he fluffed up his hair and made sure he wasn’t sporting any mortar dots on his face. He scrubbed with hot water up to his elbows before emerging to put the supper on.

He pulled the two glass dishes out to the counter and popped their lids off. The side dish went in uncovered, needing the chance to brown, but Wake found where Bree hid her foils and such and pulled off a length of foil, crimping it around the top of the main dish before placing both in the oven. Before Bree came down, Wake popped out to his truck to get his clean shirt, and a surprise.

Bree came downstairs greeted by a thumping sound. Standing on the landing, she was going to come down into the kitchen, but pivoted toward the sound, looking toward the old front door. Wake was hammering a finish nail into the door.

“What are you doing now?” she called out, her hand clamping around the handrail as she leaned out to see if she could see beyond him.

Wake put the hammer down and picked something else up. A loop of wire went around the angled nail, and Wake took a step back to look at his handiwork. He looked over his shoulder and saw Bree approaching.

“We couldn’a go to the pub, so I thought I’d bring the pub to us,” Wake declared, moving aside to reveal the dartboard he’d just hung.

Bree broke into a broad smile.

“Is that a challenge?” she queried, her voice warm.
“If you like, but considering the show you put on that night, I think I should get to go first – after we eat, of course.”

“Of course. I look forward to it,” she confidently retorted, then began striding away to the kitchen to set the table.

She stopped short as she entered the kitchen, seeing the table already mostly laid. Before she made any more forward progress, Wake brushed close by her.

“You don’t seem to have any stemmed glasses,” he said as he passed, “unless I’m not looking in the right place.”

“Um, no, I don’t – no need for them.”

“I guess we can drink our toast out of tumblers,” he humorously offered.

“Toast? – but…”

“To celebrate one year of construction at Lallybroch – did ye forget?” Wake questioned, turning with his hand around the neck of a bottle of Rose.

“I didn’t forget, but I don’t drink,” Bree informed Wake with a shake of her head.

“So that’s why I couldn’t find a corkscrew either?” Wake asked, trying to surreptitiously unscrew the corkscrew protruding from his Swiss army knife.

“Sorry,” Bree shrugged.

“Not to worry,” Wake shook his head, “whatever you have to hand will do.”

“I think I have the perfect alternative – it’s rich flavored, amber colored…”
“Not whisky,” Wake again shook.

“Nope, just a really strong cream soda – it’s good with almost everything…what are we having?”

Wake smiled.

“Baked pork chops on a bed of onion and pineapple, and shingled potatoes, with mam’s chocolate cake for dessert.”

“Yeah, the cream will be perfect with all of that.”

~~~~~

Brianna grabbed what was still needed and completed the table settings before heading into the pantry to scrounge up the cream soda. She came back with a four-pack in a cardboard holder, and popped the whole thing into the fridge.

“They won’t be really cold, but they’ll get a bit of a chill before we’re ready to eat. They’re kinda foamy at room temperature.”

Bree sat at the table, needing to be off her feet for a bit. Wake came and sat too, nodding at Bree as he landed in the chair.

“I think twenty minutes ought to do it.” Wake offered.

Bree nodded and smiled in return.

“Quicker than any restaurant, really,” Bree replied.

Wake nodded this time.
“You really don’t drink?” Wake asked.

“I wasn’t legally old enough until this past October, and Mom didn’t keep any alcohol in the house – and the stuff my dad brought can kill on contact!”

“Aye, my Da told me about that! Where did your Da get whisky that old and strong?”

Bree looked down and blushed as she thought how to phrase it.

“It’s been in the family – probably spent a few years right here.”

“If I’d have found a cache of that while clearing things out here…” Wake trailed off, shaking his head in appreciation of the aged and potent potable.

“Most of it’s in Wales right now. A friend has a lot of my Dad’s stuff stored. He had a painting sent to me for my birthday of…an ancestor I bear a resemblance to. I’m still trying to figure out where to hang it.”

“Blessing or curse? – to look like this ancestor?” Wake inquired.

“I’m not sure yet,” Bree replied with a shy smile.

“I’ve got a bit of experience in that field. Even you compared me to my Da. It’s a lot to live up to, and I fail more often than I shine.”

Brianna didn’t know what to say. Wake was revealing something that was quite personal, something he saw as a personal failing.

“Perhaps…it’s easier for me because I never knew the person I’m being compared to. And I may resemble my dad, but no one expects me to be like him.”

Wake nodded.
“Probably so. And I shouldna care what strangers think, but there are times I’ll see someone looking at me, then my Da, and you can almost hear them thinking ‘A shame the one who has his like isna the preacher.’ Ye see, I’m not the respectable one. I’ve made my fair share of mistakes.”

Bree looked at his hand resting on the table. She reached her hand out and placed it lightly on his hand, smiling at him.

“You’re very good at what you do, and I’m willing to bet anyone who questions whether you are like your father doesn’t know either of you very well.”

Wake’s smile blossomed.

“Taing dhut,” he softly said in Gaelic, pretty sure Brianna understood at least that much of her ancestral tongue.

“Tha mi tuigsinn,” she surprised him with.

“You’ve got more of the Gaidhlig than I thought.”

“I’m trying.”

~~~~

When their meal was heated, Wake took care of the items in the oven while Brianna fetched the cream soda from the fridge, twisting the lid off of one bottle and pouring half into each cup. The glass pans were set on the table on trivets, and Wake did the serving, landing a pork chop, a spoonful of onion and pineapple, and from the other pan a scoop of potatoes, onto each plate.

“That smells incredible,” Bree gushed as they both retook their seats, breathing in the scents of the meal deeply.

“Aye, Mam’s house was awash in this smell – I could barely keep from eating it then!...Now, let
me sample this drink of yours,” Wake said, raising the cup to his lips. “Um, not bad. Not whisky to be sure.”

“Why is it such a big deal that I don’t drink?” Brianna earnestly asked, genuinely curious.

Wake looked like he’d found his words three different times, but just contorted his face again.

“Perhaps it’s cultural – Scots drink.”

“I’m a Scot, and if I had only run into this since coming here, I might be able to buy that, but I’ve had people trying to put a glass or a bottle into my hands, get something alcoholic down my throat for years. Like I’m not normal because I don’t want to drink.”

Wake smiled apologetically.

“I don’t have any answers, I guess. There’s nothing wrong with it – but have you ever tried any?”

Bree shook her head.

“Except what you gave me to warm up after you found me by the mill – I thought I was going to breathe fire!”

“I didna have any other way to put some heat in ye – I was afraid you might shiver apart.”

“I know.”

They both shyly smiled at each other.

“We should dig in while it’s still warm,” Wake said, thinking their previous topic had run its course.
Bree smiled at Wake and took up her fork.

“What d’ye think?” Wake asked as she swallowed her first forkful.

“Umm,” she hummed closed-mouthed.

“I hoped you’d like it.”


Wake had seen Brianna eat enough times before, but it struck him just the same tonight – Bree actually ate...heartily. She didn’t do the dainty picking of someone trying to impress. She wasn’t the ‘I’ll just have the salad’ type. She worked hard, played hard, and ate with aplomb.

They lingered a bit over the meal, letting the evening steep, attain its full richness.

"Should we save the cake for another night?” Wake asked.

“We could have it for breakfast,” Brianna suggested.

A fishy smile played about Wake’s lips.

“When you get here for the morning meeting,” Brianna added.

“Of course,” Wake burred, liking the light level of innuendo in this interaction.

“Or perhaps we’ll burn off enough of the meal during the dart game,” Wake offered.

“That’s right…I do believe a challenge was offered,” Bree smirked.

“En garde,” Wake issued.
They both stood, eyed each other, and walked to the far end of the house where Wake had hung the dart board. He picked up what looked like a high class cigar box and unlatched it, revealing the darts, set in in alternating directions.

“You first,” Brianna deferred.

Wake took his darts in hand and stood at the distance they’d agreed upon. He took in and released a nervous breath, nodded at Brianna and looked at the board. Four bullseyes.

Brianna’s eyes went round with disbelief.

“Um…ahh,” she vocalized.

Wake stood there smirking.

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve suckered me?” Bree asked.

“Och, well, did I no tell you I’m the pub champion…for all of Inverness?”

Bree’s mouth fell open.

“But…you acted like…this means war, you know?” Brianna clarified.

Wake handed Brianna her darts and pointed toward the dart board. Brianna looked at him once more, still not believing this turn of events. She took a couple of deep, cleansing breaths to calm her nerves and steady her hands. She placed a tight circle of darts in the bullseye where they were surrounded by the darts Wake had thrown.

“Och,” he sounded, amazed that she’d not faltered, and had actually done a much harder thing than he had.
Bree smiled with a slight look of smugness. Wake pulled all the darts from the board and handed half of them to Brianna.

“Shall we take ten paces back?” Wake suggested.

“Fine with me.”

Wake and Brianna were evenly matched, trading shot after shot. They upped the difficulty after each round, standing further away from their target, having to use their non-dominant hand. By the final round, they were almost as far back as the entry to the living room. Wake had one more dart left with which to best Brianna’s score. It had been an epic battle. Wake eyed up his target and sent the missile flying. It landed millimeters outside the bullseye zone, sealing Bree’s victory.

“Yes,” she hissed as Wake dropped to one knee, his head lowered.

Bree broadly smiled as she looked down at him, her hand touching his shoulder in consolation. Wake looked up. With his left hand, he scooped her hand off his shoulder and placed it in his right hand, their fingers hooked over each other’s. Bree could have easily straightened her fingers and ended the contact, but she didn’t.

“What are you doing?” she softly asked instead.

“Bowing to a superior dart player,” he told her, then kissed the back of her hand in the most courtly of fashions.

His lips were warm and soft on the back of her hand, and it triggered that fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Stand up,” she ordered, trying to keep from ruining the lightness and fun of the night.

Wake stood, but their hands still didn’t part. He looked at her hand in his.

“Well…it is getting late, and you’ve beaten me quite thoroughly.”
He cast a glance at the door, implying he was thinking about leaving. The next move was in Brianna’s hands, literally. Her grip tightened, not ready for his hand to let go, and Wake looked back at Brianna. She looked a bit apprehensive.

“Before you leave…um…” Brianna’s voice was unsure, and Wake was hanging on every word.

“Could you lay…”

Wake’s eyes slowly widened and his mouth dropped a bit.

“The fire like you had it before? It burned perfectly the night the power went out.”

It took a second for the rest of her words to register. Until they did, the pair stood in silence. Wake reviewed her words in his head, trying to erase her hesitant pauses. Bree squeezed his hand once more.

“Och…aye,” he said in an exhale, “I’ll gather the wood.”

He was through the door before he could do anything inappropriate. Wake’s non-reaction puzzled Brianna, making her review her words. Was she unconsciously flirting again?

“Oh,” Bree quickly voiced, realizing it wasn’t the words, but where she broke them that could have been taken the wrong way.

Bree decided that if Wake didn’t mention her inadvertent innuendo, she wouldn’t either. The night had been going too well to ruin it now.

~~~~

Wake came back in with an armload of wood, almost piled too high for him to see where he was going. Brianna took the top two split log chunks off of his load and carried them to the hearth.
“This ought to do it,” Wake told Brianna as he let the wood slowly cascade down his arms.

He set to sorting it, kindling at one end, full logs at the other. He took the two split pieces Bree had transported and added them to the appropriate pile.

“Do ye want me to stack it for ye, or teach you to do it for yourself?”

“If you think you could teach me, that’d be great. I might need to do this for myself in the middle of the night.”

“Or you could call me should there be another power cut.”

Brianna blushed. She could imagine him coming to her rescue, getting her fire burning in more than one way.

“I…wouldn’t want to get too dependent,” she shyly replied, the flutter returning to the pit of her stomach, making her sit on the hearth.

“Then I’ll show you the right way to stack a fire.”

Much the way he talked her through how to do stone work, Wake instructed Brianna how to arrange the varying sizes of wood into a quick to take fire stack. It took nearly an hour, but finally, something resembling the stack Wake had set up a few weeks before was once more standing in the fireplace. Bree stood back admiring what she and Wake had managed to do.

“Perfect,” Bree softly said, and then looked happily into Wake’s face.

“Aye,” he barely voiced in return.

The draw between them was strong.

“Och, we forgot the toast,” Wake said quickly, hoping he could distract himself from what he wanted to do just then.
He could barely breathe. If Bree was within reach right now, Wake was sure he’d succumb to his baser instincts. It also made him glad they hadn’t had the wine tonight. The flirting was almost overwhelming his sober mind, and with Bree not being used to the effects of alcohol, it could have been the makings of a disaster, or at the very least, a regret.

Taking a moment to cool, Wake poured the remnants of the third bottle of cream soda evenly into their cups. It certainly looked the part for a toast – richly amber colored, hints of vanilla swirling up to the nose, and a tangy burn left on your tongue, this time by the carbonation of the not quite cold enough soda.

“Here we go,” Wake said as he came back to Brianna by the hearth, “Two fingers of your finest.”

Bree giggled. Wake raised his cup.

“Slainte Mhath,” he saluted.

“One year of work,” Bree said in reply, raising her own cup.

They lightly clinked the rims together, and each took a sip. Wake went back and finished his in another gulp, and Bree followed suit, tilting her head back and tapping the bottom of the cup to get every last drop.

“I’ve just seen the state I’ve left your kitchen in. I should help you clean it up.”

“We won’t get any sleep if we take the time tonight. I’m not sure I can afford another night without my eight hours – I’ll be down to six as it is. The dishes can wait, can’t they? Or does your mom want her pans back before dawn?”

“Nah, the pans are on a two day pass,” Wake quipped.

“I’ll get them back to your mom.”
They lingered in each other’s presence.

“So,” Wake toned, “Cake for breakfast then?”

Brianna nodded.

“I’ll see myself out.”

“Goodnight,” Brianna responded, “And it was a good night,” she nodded, smiling at Wake.

“Aye, it was,” Wake replied with a smile of his own and an affirmative bob of his head.

Neither of them breathed until the door closed.

~~~~~
The next two chapters are a little short, but they need to be separate chapters, at least in my mind that's how they work - I'll try to post the next one in a couple of weeks to keep everyone entertained instead of waiting the usual time. In another note, I just got the season 4 DVD, and among the extras found a reference to "Fraser's Fridge" - I almost spit my teeth out because I had written most of this chapter months ago, and had no idea anyone associated with the show was using that phrase! I am not copying them, but I guess great Scottish minds think alike! Sadly, also greatly disappointed in season 4 overall, but the bulk of those thoughts are being saved for a twitter thread I intend to start shortly. Back to this story, only two more chapters until one of the big ones - in pages and events.

Claire Fraser, Medicine Woman (AKA Fraser's Fridge)

After dealing with the first dental eruptions, and successfully introducing Alex to solid food, to a degree, the next major hurdle was my return to work. In anticipation of a difficult transition, I began expressing milk so we could introduce Alex to bottle feeding before the day came that it would be his only option. I also wanted to see how he would react to being fed by Jamie. I had barely been out of Alex’s sight since the day he was born, but I started making myself scarce for an hour or so at a time. As long as Alex was with Jamie, he didn’t seem to mind my absence at all.

I tried to replicate the schedule I would be following once I went back to work. I’d nurse Alex in the morning. Jamie would offer the boy apple or melon, or a big chunk of cooked meat he could suck and gnash at and give him a bottle for lunch. He’d join us at the dinner table and have the option then of raw or cooked carrot, green beans, or pasta – only one at any given meal. Alex was back to the breast each bedtime. It was taking some time for me to adjust, just as much as it was for Alex. Getting the timing right for when and how much milk to pump was a delicate balance, knowing the last thing I would want would be not quite reaching home before I began to leak, or having pumped too much for Alex to enjoy his next nursing.

I would be working a three day week to begin with, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and Alex and my swim class was scheduled for Fridays. We’d be separated for the middle of the week, and then bond the day after and have the weekend and Monday to be close again. It seemed to be a reasonable compromise, but infants aren’t always reasonable, and Alex was changing and developing on a daily basis. Just in this transitional span, Alex reached the point where his grasping skills advanced, and he could use his thumb and fingers to pinch individual items, which opened a whole new world of foods he was capable of popping into his mouth. Berries, cereals, even bits of scrambled egg were now literally in his grasp – although his initial reaction to egg makes me think it won’t be among Alex’s favorites, a distaste I believe he inherited from me. Perhaps when he’s old enough to disguise the flavor with pepper or ketchup, he might reconsider, but that option is not on the table until many months down the line.

As much preparing as we did, I found myself with a nervous stomach the day before I returned to work.
“You doona have to do this,” Jamie consoled me.

“I do, actually,” I sighed.

“I would think they’d understand.”

“THEY would understand, but I made this promise to myself. I was on my own with Brianna, but I still managed to become a doctor. I had to sacrifice some of Bree’s milestones, but I have done countless good since. But Alex is not being left in the hands of caretakers. He’s with his father, a place he very much likes to be. I need to do this for me, and for all the sacrifices Bree had to make for me to become a doctor. I put a lot into being a doctor, and I get boundless satisfaction from helping others. The fact that I’ve had this many months before I had to think about working means I am in a privileged situation. My need to work, luckily, is not financial, but it is a need nonetheless.”

Jamie nodded.

“Aye, Sassenach, I understand.”

~~~~~

Actually walking out the door in the morning left me feeling like the front door was one of the standing stones at Craigh Na Dun, and I was moving through centuries between home and the hospital. This would be a short week as March did not begin until a Wednesday, and still it would be a difficult separation.

I found a ‘good luck’ text on my phone from Brianna with a thumbs-up emoji followed by a red cross, a doctor in a mask, and a caduceus. I’d been hearing very little from Bree, but she had been continuing to send pictures of the progress at Lallybroch for Jamie to pore over, so I had to assume she was very busy, and not willfully ignoring me.

I had barely had time to sit at my desk when there was a knock at my door.

“Dr. Fraser?” a voice toned.

“Janet.”
“Just wanted to welcome you back. How’s life with the new baby? Things getting back to normal?”

“If by normal you mean,” I smirked suggestively, “Then, very nearly. I just didn’t know the Nessie condoms actually had a face on them.”

“Oh, Christ, that could ruin the mood.”

“When it comes to Jamie, nothing ruins the mood,” I joked, finding my cheeks getting warm.

“How’s Bree doing?”

I sighed and looked down.

“I wish I knew for sure. She changed her plans for Christmas at the last minute, and she’s been rather evasive about it. I can’t help but feel something happened, but on the other hand, I can’t keep charging in and directing her life. It’s hard to let go and admit she’s an adult now. My maternal side has been rather amped up since having Alex. It’s tearing me, letting go of one child just as I welcome the next.”

“Resist the urge to micro-manage where Brianna is concerned. If she’s ready, let her be an adult. She’ll turn to you on her own if and when she needs you, but only if she feels you let her come to that choice.”

I nodded.

“I know. I can only imagine how I’d entangle myself in her life if she were still in Boston. Maybe it’s a good thing she’s in Scotland.”

Janet looked at her watch.

“I have an appointment, but it’s good to have you back Claire. Hang in there.”

I smiled at my friend, nodding as she retreated.
It’s a good thing I did test my schedule leading up to this day, and brought a breast pump with me. By noontime I was well engorged. Each lunchtime would find me expressing Alex’s next lunch, bottling it and getting it into the small office fridge before going on with my day. The key would be remembering to take it home with me.

I spent most of my first day back to work reading files to get me up to speed on the cases I would be handling in the weeks to come. It was the most time I’d spent alone since Alex’s birth. While I remained focused on my job, I was fine, but then thoughts of Jamie and Alex would infiltrate, and I would find myself daydreaming about what they were up to.

I had a consultation in the afternoon that pushed to the edge of leaving time.

“How’s the first day been?”

“I felt a little rusty, to be honest, but that’s why it was paperwork and meetings, not surgeries on the first day. I appreciate not drawing a solo for my first surgery back, but rest assured, my head and my scalpel will be in the game by the time we wheel our patient into theatre.”

He smirked and laughed.

“I always get a kick outta that – ‘theatre’ – like we’re about to perform Shakespeare, or something.”

I smiled, at least as far as he knew. Inside, I was clocking his head on the conference room table. It may have been funny, even a little bit cute -the first time.

“What’s that?” he asked, catching me swearing under my breath.
“It’s a Gaelic greeting,” I told him, half hoping he would go around using it.

And then it was finally time to go home, make the trip back to the world I had left this morning.

~~~~

Jamie was by the door the moment I turned the knob, and I fell into his arms.

“Aye, braw. I tried to keep him up until ye got home, but he went out about an hour ago. How did ye’re day go?”

“I was in slow motion compared to everybody else. It’s like I aged at a different rate while I was away from work. But, they say you’re only as old as you feel, so let me feel you,” I purred, very much needing this contact with my husband just now.

I ran my hands over his shoulders and down his sides, curving my hands around his hips and resting them on his rump.

“Feelin’ younger yet?” Jamie hummed in my ear.

“Yessss,” I hissed in return, tilting my head back to show Jamie how good it felt to be in his arms, and how glad I was to be home.

I kissed him and saw him come to the edge of tears. It was clear he had worried about me today, and it made me love him even more. Knowing he lets me be who I am despite the fears he has only serves to deepen our connection.

“How much longer do you think Alex will sleep?” I questioned.

“Long enough,” Jamie replied, helping me get coat my off and hung up, and then scooping me up into his arms and toting me into the bedroom.
Alex was sleeping soundly in his drawer, and I retrieved what I needed from my bedside drawer to safely engage with Jamie. I felt restored the moment we came together. Jamie may be pushing three hundred years old, but he is technically a younger man than I am by many years, and I believe I have become more youthful through our contact.

~~~~~

The second day back to work was a bit better, but I was more than glad these were the only two days this week that I’d be away from Jamie and Alex, and with the swim class for Alex and me not starting for another two weeks yet, once I got home Thursday night, it’d be to stay until the following Tuesday. I hoped that inching into working again would keep my feelings of guilt and abandonment to a minimum, but perhaps there is no way to do that. I felt good while I was at work, accomplishing tasks, and helping people the way I always had, but the moment my thoughts turned to Alex, and home, I wondered if I was truly doing the right thing.

~~~~~

Saturday. A day of calm. Brianna sat leisurely at her drawing table, large coffee mug set on a level table near-by, HB pencil held lightly in her left hand as she scanned over what she’d been working on. The interior space of the house’s French door refrigerator with dual freezer drawers was recreated in minute detail. Each item of the contents was sketched to scale in the location in which it resided, a perfect guide to Brianna Fraser’s fridge.

“Now, the next time my fridge gets invaded…Wake can know what space is available, and put everything back where it belongs!” Brianna explained to herself, remembering the disarrangement he’d left behind and assuming the Valentine’s Day meal would not be the only time such a thing happened.

Bree took her new masterpiece of technical drawing into the kitchen and taped it to the left-hand fridge door. She smiled proudly at her work, laughed to herself about the title she’d given the drawing – Fraser’s Fridge - and then turned her mind to the evening to come. Wake had invited her to join him for a movie – whatever was playing – they’d decide when they got there. Now that the ice was broken, it was nearly a weekly event that the two of them would do something together outside of work.

~~~~~
“Not much of a selection,” Wake lamented as he drove Brianna back to Lallybroch.

“It’s OK. It just reminds me why I don’t go to movies very often. I’m better off with a DVD and my laptop.”

“Aye, and I canna believe how rude the people behind us were,” Wake crooned.

“My feet actually stuck to the floor – I think they mopped with soda!”

Wake chortled.

“Listen to us, complaining like the elder church ladies about the next generation – ‘back in my day, no one went to the cinema unless they were fully dressed’,” Wake mocked in a high voice.

Brianna smiled broadly and laughed at his imitation, biting her lip as they had just pulled up in front of the house.

“Coffee?” Bree invited.

“Why not,” he replied, putting the truck in park and turning off the engine.

As Bree unlocked the door, she pushed into the hall and handed the door off to Wake to close. It felt completely natural to be walking into the house together at the end of a long day. Bree didn’t even hesitate, striding into the kitchen and prepping the coffee pot. Wake came right by her, took up the kettle, filled it in the sink and got it on the burner. They turned and smiled at each other.

“I’ll get the cream,” Wake offered, making his way back to the fridge.

“What’s this?” he growled in a bit of an annoyed pitch.

“It’s a map to the refrigerator, so everything gets put back where it belongs,” Bree informed him as he continued to stare at her drawing.
“Och, really?”

“Really,” she flatly answered, the smile becoming hard to hold at bay.

“You,” he said with a shake of his head.

The smile found its way to the surface and Bree placed her hand on Wake’s shoulder, her forehead momentarily touching down as well, giving Wake a fleeting moment of the scent of her. He drew in a long, slow breath while the proximity lasted, closing his eyes. The kettle beginning to whistle brought him back to reality.

“I’ll get the mugs,” Bree offered, turning and reaching up to a nearby cupboard as Wake watched her stretch. He seriously thought about slipping his hands onto either side of her waist, thinking he could claim he was just steadying her balance, but he knew there were thresholds that once passed would lead him to lose control.

“Aye,” he breathed out, trying to blot the curve of her rear end out of his mind. “I’ll get the kettle.”

They were quiet while the coffee steeped. Bree got the spoons, Wake finally got the cream, shaking his head as he looked at Bree’s drawing once more, noticing the title this time. They moved everything over to the table and waited for the coffee to darken.

“Fraser’s Fridge? – the title on yer drawing – sounds like a frontier town – one of those places that has a micro-climate that keeps it colder than all surrounding territory.”

Bree shot him a look, fighting a fishy grin. Her stomach fluttered, feeling triumphant that Wake had not only noticed her drawing, he had returned to it as a topic of conversation, having had to think about, and take close notice of, what she’d drawn.

“So…” Wake finally breached the silence, “Da’s got another movie night coming up tomorrow.”

“He invited me,” she answered.

Wake nodded, pretty sure that was the case.
“Shall I save you a seat then? – I can assure ye the floors willna be sticky, but as for the rudeness of the people sittin’ around us…”

Wake smirked as his words trailed off.

“I’ll meet you there,” Bree countered.

~~~~~

Wake had taken up a place at the near end of the couch in the study at the manse. His drink was on the narrow table behind the couch, so his arm sat perched along the back edge of the couch. Others were darting in and out of the room, and Roger was angling the screen just right so the majority of people could get a clear view of the screen.

“Bree’s coming?” Roger asked Wake.

“Aye, and it’s probably a step up from the cinema we went to last night.”

“Another date?” Roger asked with a smile, so glad he’d been right with his advice about Brianna.

“We’re just hanging out outside of work, Da.”

“That’s what you’re telling the lass. Doona forget, I saw the truth.”

Wake nodded.

“I don’t want to repeat the same mistakes, Da, but it is testing me.”

“Go on in and get yourself settled, Brianna,” they both heard Fiona’s voice toll from the kitchen, ending their conversation.
Her cheeks were still pink from the cold as she came into the study.

“Hi,” she said to Wake and Roger, smiling as she came around and sat on the edge of the couch right next to Wake.

“I still can’t believe I never noticed there was a piano in this room,” Bree admitted.

“Aye, well, this room has many secrets,” Roger pontificated, “Just ask ye’re Mam.”

Bree tilted her head.

“What do you mean?”

Roger smiled.

“For many years, I kept a secret stash hidden in the bookcase – a picture of ye’re Mam on her first wedding day among the treasures. Mrs. Graham, my Da’s housekeeper, and Fiona’s Gran, she knew Claire would come back someday, and would need someone to believe her adventure. It’s how we knew.”

Bree smiled and nodded.

“You understand what he’s talking about?” Wake asked of Bree.

She nodded quickly, humming ‘um-huh’, then settling fully back into the cushions. Wake’s arm was still across the back of the couch, and his fingers played with the idea of touching her shoulder, but refrained.

“Try to stay awake this time, aye, Wren?” Roger teased.

Bree turned and smiled at Wake, remembering looking up into his face as she woke from her
unintentional nap the first movie night she came to.

“I’ll try,” she finally replied, turning back toward Roger, absently sliding her arm across the back of the couch toward Wake.

Wake’s arm dropped around her shoulders, and Bree leaned toward him.

“I doona mind, fall asleep on me again if you like.”

~~~~~

Roger tried to keep his mind on the movie of his choosing, but found himself watching Wake and Brianna instead. Their rapport was relaxed. Roger spied them commenting back and forth, glancing at each other, very much attuned to each other. At the end of the evening, Brianna was still quite awake this time. She stood from the couch and placed her hand on the front of Wake’s shoulder.

“See you tomorrow.”

“Aye,” Wake beamed back at her.

“Roger,” she said, walking over to him and giving him a hug, “thank-you for tonight.”

“Och, you’re welcome, Wren. You’re always welcome here.”

“Fee?”

“You needn’t even ask, give us a hug lass.”

She sent a longing glance in Wake’s direction, and then made her way out of the room.

Once she was out the door, Roger was at Wake’s shoulder.
“Och, lad, that’s a lass who’s got warm feelings for ye.”

“And I told you, I’m not going to do anything to ruin what she feels. It has to be her move, and that’s going to take time after what I did the last time she did make a move.”

“Well, I can tell ye, she’s tuning up the orchestra in advance of the overture.”

“Da,” Wake shook his head.
Chapter Notes

Another kinda short chapter here, but I will make up for it in the following two chapters, there's just a certain way I want to present/break up a few of these scenes leading into something important. Again, I will post the next chapter in a couple of weeks because I don't want you all biting your fingernails off because I didn't give you enough this time!!

Back In The Swim Of Things

Just when I thought I’d gotten the hang of being a working mom once more, someone threw a wobbly on me. Among my emails was an official notification that my Friday swim class with Alex had been changed to Tuesdays due to a change in the availability of the pool. I would have to rejigger my entire schedule. I was owl-ly all day, and Jamie knew the moment I got home that I was angry about something.

“Something wrong, Sassenach?” Jamie asked as soon as I came in the door.

“Yes, they’ve changed the day for the swim class, and I spent half the day trying to figure out how I could make it work, and I can’t,” I said in defeat, “I was so looking forward to it.”

“Och, I’m sorry lass, I know Alex would have liked it.”

“I don’t want to disappoint him, Jamie, so I began thinking, if I can’t take Alex to the swim class, I thought maybe you could.”

Jamie was taken aback by my suggestion, and I could see his mind working on excuses.

“Well, for starters, I doona have a swimming suit.”

I smiled, knowing that would be objection number one, and pulled the trunks I had purchased as a site to store order out of my bag.
“These should fit,” I said, holding the black and aqua knee length shorts out to him.

“Jamie, please, just because I can’t take him, doesn’t mean I want Alex to miss out. Learning to swim at this age is good for him. He won’t fear the water, and it lessens the chance of drowning significantly. Go to the first class. If you really don’t enjoy it, I’ll find a way to change my schedule.”

I looked pleadingly at him, tears filling the corners of my eyes until he shut his eyes and nodded.

“Aye, I’ll do it. God, Sassenach, you can convince me to do anything, can’t ye? – from changing history to changing diapers! But I consider myself lucky that you’re on my side, for those who have opposed you share the same grizzly fate.”

Jamie began to smile and pulled me in closer.

“God, I love you,” Jamie toned, and then kissed me.

~~~~~~

My next week back to work went well. I got back into the operating theatre and it felt like I’d never left. I was living a life I had only dreamed of. One where when the work day was over, I had a husband and baby to go home to. All three of us were learning our new schedules, falling into patterns, and I was priming Jamie to prepare him for the swim classes that began five days hence. It should have been tomorrow, and it should have been me preparing to take Alex to the pool, but I was quite sure that Jamie would be able to fill my shoes, and I hoped he enjoyed it enough to take Alex to all of the classes.

~~~~~~

“Happy St. Patrick’s Day,” Brianna greeted Wake with.

“Och, lass, you do realize you’re not in Ireland?”
“In Boston, everyone’s Irish on St. Patrick’s Day!”

“Aye, well, this isna Boston. You won’t catch us turning rivers, bagels or beer green. Sacrilege!” Wake proclaimed with a shake of his head and a devilish grin.

Bree was slightly pink in the cheeks but she couldn’t help but smile at Wake’s reaction, and revel in his grin.

“I’ll know better next year.”

“Aye,” he replied with a nod.

For a moment he stopped, realizing how much he hoped Bree would be here next year. When he looked up again, Bree was looking at him, and he swore she was thinking the same thing.

“So, what’s today’s game plan?” Wake broke the silence with.

“Well, with the fireplaces for the Laird’s room and the North room done now…there’s just the ones on the third floor – including the one in my bedroom – oh, and the one in here,” she realized as they entered the study.

“Aye, and I can split my time between those and getting the tower finally squared away on the nice days…would…you like to be there when the tower is finished? Have a hand on the final stone?”

Bree lit up.

“I’d like that, very much.”

Wake nodded, smiling at her positive reaction to his suggestion.

“So, dinner at the pub tonight?” Wake inquired.
It was Tuesday again, not only a day for Claire to go to work, but the day Jamie would take Alex to his first swim class. Claire was up early, making sure she packed everything Jamie and Alex would need, still very much wishing it was her who would be taking their boy to the pool. She laid out the swim trunks she’d gotten for Jamie. She’d washed them and put them away so that Jamie couldn’t make them disappear between the time she brought them home and now, not that she really thought it was something Jamie would do, but she wanted to be sure.

Claire fed and changed Alex, feeling just the slightest bit clingy today. She held him and bounced him and talked to him as long as she had time for.

“The class begins at eleven AM,” she reminded Jamie as they sat at the kitchen table for breakfast.

“Relax, lass, I may not have been the one who signed up for this, but I’d not deny our son something that could benefit him like this.”

Claire smiled.

“I wish it was me going to this. I’d give almost anything. It was supposed to be my time to bond with Alex – his bond with you is already so strong, and I’m just the milk machine.”

“Aye, but damn fine milk if I do say so myself… Doona fash, Sassenach, Alex and I both need you. I will do my best to fill your..er…shoes today in the pool.”

Jamie and Alex accompanied Claire to the front door as she left for the day.

“Tell me all about it when I get home tonight?” Claire said longingly.

“Every detail, Sassenach – you’ll feel as if you were there.”
That brought a tear to her eye, but she put on a brave face and headed off to work.

~~~

Jamie pulled into the parking lot closest to the pool entry, so far away from the part of the hospital Claire was in that he could fulfill a full day’s worth of steps in getting to her, if he were someone who subscribed to that idea. He was fifteen minutes early, and more apprehensive about getting into a swimming pool with his son than he ever was charging into battle.

“Well, it's time we get in there, Alex,” Jamie said, turning to look over his shoulder.

It was still chilly, and the wind blowing across the open expanse of parking lot just reinforced that chill. Jamie made sure Alex was strapped in tight to his chest and shrouded the baby in his coat yet again. Jamie slung the diaper bag over his left shoulder, his change of clothing in a zip-lock bag within the diaper bag to protect it against getting soiled, and to protect the spare diapers from getting wet on the trip home.

Jamie wondered if he’d be the only man in a sea of women with their babies, and he exhaled, feeling the weight of responsibility of being an involved dad. Inside the main door were two other doors leading to the men’s and women’s locker rooms. Inside the men’s locker room was a strip of back to back lockers with a bench on either side. The walkways were wide on either side, allowing for wheelchairs or gurneys to be wheeled through, as this was a rehabilitation pool.

No one else was there, just Jamie and Alex. Jamie picked a locker and hung his coat in it. He took a receiving blanket out of the diaper bag and spread it on the floor in front of the locker he had chosen. He unstrapped Alex from his chest and put him down at his feet on the blanket. Jamie continued to strip and hang each item of clothing in the locker, soon standing naked with his son at his feet.

With a shake of his head, he took the swimming trunks out of their zipper bag and slid them on, securing the draw cord to make sure he didn't lose his trunks in mixed company. He shifted his hips a couple of times, hoping it would help things fall into place comfortably. The lining of the trunks was the closest Jamie had come to underwear in a good many years, and he found it confining.

Jamie checked to see if he needed to change Alex’s diaper before getting him into the pool. Alex didn’t need a fresh diaper, but Jamie slipped a water-proof cover over his regular diaper to keep if from taking on moisture that could sink Alex to the bottom of the pool.
Both now properly adorned for the pool, Jamie held the boy to his chest, and prepared to brave whatever awaited him. No one was in the pool as Jamie approached, but there were four mothers with their infants standing on the pool deck. They looked a bit surprised to see a man, but each one slowly began to smile, at first enjoying the interaction of father and son, followed by an appreciation of Jamie’s physicality.

The class leader came onto the deck with a dozen or so more mothers and children.

“Alright everyone, let’s get in the water – use the ramp end.”

The class leader did not have a child of her own. Jamie thought that strange, but wanted to give this class every opportunity to be enjoyable, for Alex if not for him.

The class leader had each parent introduce themselves and their child, and as Jamie surmised, he was the sole male parent in the pool. In his turn of introduction, Jamie said it had been his wife’s intention to bring Alex, but that the change in schedule had thrown him into the breach. Jamie felt an appreciative gaze from many of the women assembled, clearly not immune to the man’s charms, though Jamie was doing nothing to encourage the adoration.

Once the novelty of having a man in the class wore off, things went along well. Parent’s lifted and swooped their babies through the water; babies splashed and cooed and cried.

~~~~~~

It was all Claire could do to make it home tonight, wanting so much to hear about Alex’s inaugural swim. She was almost overwhelmed by her own emotions as she sped into Jamie’s arms.

“Jamie?”

He held Claire tight and soothed her into calmness.

“Mo nighean donn,” he breathily released into her ear, “All is well. Our son took to the water as if he was spawned in Loch Ness itself!”

Claire let out a breath and nodded against Jamie’s chest.

“Come, a warm drink, and I shall regale you with tales of the pool.”
Jamie walked the pair of them into the kitchen, Claire clinging to him. It was a rare moment of weakness from Claire, but she was truly heartbroken to not be the one taking Alex to the pool.

A half a cup of tea later, Claire was calm and composed, and not just a little eager to hear about Alex’s aquatic adventures.

“I wasna sure they’d accept me at first – I guess this class has always been heavily mothers and bairns, so I came as a bit of a shock, but I think Alex charmed them all.”

Jamie’s smile was infectious, and Claire could not hold out against the joy Jamie was broadcasting.

“How was Alex?”

“Och, like I said, he was born to the water. The look on his face when he slapped at the surface, and it splashed back up at him – you were right, this will be a good thing for him. I’m sorry it’s not you takin’ him.”

Jamie looked down and heaved a sigh. Claire took his chin in her hand and brought his gaze up to meet hers.

“You don’t have to pretend you didn’t like it too. I love to see you so happy. I’m being selfish if I don’t. I thought about it too much today, that’s all. I want you both to enjoy this. You deserve so much. I hate how jealous and envious it has made me…you…will take him to the rest of the classes?”

The look on his face said it all, and Claire knew nothing would keep them from their appointed pool times.

~~~~~

Brianna realized just how long it had been since she last even spoke to her mother, and a wave of guilt swept over her. Day to day life had kept her more than busy, and Wake had filled in many of the non-working hours. Bree also knew her mother could read her face, and to a lesser extent, her voice, and there were things Bree didn’t wish her mother to know about just now. But she was suddenly missing her mother, and wanted her to know she was thinking about her.
Bree opened her laptop and initiated contact over Skype.

“Mom?” Bree’s voiced tremulously asked.

Claire’s face came up on the screen, Alex in her arms.

“Bree, sweetie, it’s so good to see your face. Is everything alright?”

“It’s fine, but…I feel a little guilty…”

“It’s OK, Bree. You have a life to live; you can’t feel bad about having a life. Scotland clearly agrees with you, as does building a house. You look so sure of yourself – all grown up.”

Jamie came up behind Claire, his smile expanding exponentially as he saw Brianna’s face on the screen.

“Lass?” he asked.

“Hi Dad.”

“We miss you,” Jamie pled as he took Alex into his arms, “all of us,” he informed her, indicating Alex as well.

“I miss you all too, but I’m doing OK. The house – I can see what it must have been like to live here at a different time, and I think the tower might be done before the end of this week. Wake said he’d let me place the final stone.”

Jamie nodded affirmatively.

“Good for you, lass – get your hands dirty.”
“Oh, I have been, Dad. And everyone’s been so willing to teach me here. I think some of the guys treat me like I was their daughter.”

“Aye, but remember your flesh and blood.”

“Always,” Brianna replied with a big smile. “But I thought maybe you could all come after the tower is finished and the house is mostly done – see if I’ve done a good job.”

“Och, I’m sure you’ve done it up right…but a visit…home…we’ll…”

“We’ll find a way, sweetie,” Claire interspersed.

“I’d like to stay and chat, but I believe I have a diaper to change,” Jamie said, his nose hairs clearly starting to curl.

“OK,” she said back, quickly adding “Mo gradh ort, athair” as Jamie and Alex disappeared from the screen.

“You should see the smile you just put on his face,” Claire warmly relayed.

“Mom?”

“Yes sweetie?”

“What’s it like to be in love?”

Claire smiled.

“You know there’s no simple answer to that question, don’t you?”


“I know, I was just wondering, though, how do you know?”

“Well, in my experience with your father, it’s an undeniable feeling – you just know. Why do you ask?”

“No reason, I just see the two of you together, and I know I want what you two have, but it scares me too. What if I find love, but I’m too scared to admit it?”

“True love is patient,” Claire counseled her daughter.

Bree smiled and nodded, part of her wanting to pour her heart out about Wake, and the fledgling feelings of love she thought she was experiencing, but she held back, instead talking about everything else in her life except for Wake.

~~~~~

Jamie was actually anticipating the second swim class with Alex, and I had turned all my feelings of jealousy into gladness. I was looking forward to hearing Jamie’s tales of what Alex got up to in the pool. Even so, the first half of the day dragged. That all changed early in the afternoon when I went to the nurses’ station to obtain a chart and overheard a conversation that left me smiling the rest of the day.

I’ll recount it as best as I can.

I was leafing through the pre-op notes for my patient when one of the nurses and a member of the physical therapy staff came into range of my hearing, though they spoke quietly.

“I thought it was a mommy and me class,” the nurse questioned, “there’s a dad in it?”

“Oh yeah – and he’s gorgeous – I mean, I’m not one for redheads – usually – but, he’s – and the way he has with his son. I don’t know who he belongs to, but she’s a damn lucky woman. Usually, a guy that good looking is so vain, but there isn’t a hint of self-interest in this man. And he has the sexiest accent.”

I smirked as I heard them talking, pretty positive by the description that they were talking about Jamie, Alex and the swim class. For a moment I made eye contact with the therapist, blushing a bit, nodding to her and getting a nod in return. As far as hospital gossip went, it was mild, but I now knew to keep an ear out – my red-headed Scot was on the radar.
Unlike my return home a week ago, where I was all keyed up about not being there for Alex’s swim class, this Tuesday I was calm and happy as I headed home, and I greeted Jamie with a kiss.

“Good day?” I warmly asked.

“Aye,” Jamie replied, his smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

“Alex loves the water – he started to quiver his lip when it came time to get out this time. I barely kept him from crying.”

“Oh, poor little one,” I commiserated, leaning my head into Jamie’s shoulder, getting the embrace I so needed.

I decided to keep the hospital gossip to myself for the time being. I know Jamie was used to being admired, even back in our Leoch days I witnessed plenty of pulses quickening at his appearance, but I was of a mind that knowing his fellow classmates were ogling him could change the dynamic of the class, and have Jamie worried about irrelevant things when I just wanted him to enjoy the class.

We quietly went into the bedroom, only to find Alex wide awake. I couldn’t resist picking him up.

“Hello there, Alex. I hear you like to swim.”

“Ya Gaaa,” he answered, once again reaching for my lips. I smiled at his growing range of vocalizations.

“How was he eating today?” I asked.

“We shared a carrot, and he gave a gnaw at some chicken – but he still enjoys the milk pretty well – although he has shown some resistance to the change in delivery system – not that I can I blame
him for that!”

“He is your son,” I joked with a broad smile.

“Aye,” Jamie purred in my ear with a smirk and a glance at my breasts.

~~~~~
Codename:Aubergine

Chapter Notes

I know this is quicker than I usually post again, but I've actually been chomping at the
bit to get this chapter posted, and after how short the last two chapters were, it's been a
long enough wait, and the wait is over for a number of things...enjoy.

Codename : Aubergine

Wake had invited Bree to come up to the tower for what he thought would be the last day of the
build for it. Despite intending to get a jump on the day, and be ready well in advance of his arrival,
she found herself running late. As fate would have it, she was long overdue to run a few loads of
laundry, and was down to one last pair of pants. She grabbed them out of her closet, slipping the
off-white painter pants on.

“What the…?” she snarled.

The pants were far too roomy at the waist.

“These aren’t mine,” she moaned to herself, running her hands around the inside of the waistband.

“You have got to be kidding me – How the hell did I end up with…oh yeah…I did Wake’s laundry –
but that was months ago. I thought I got it all back to him.”

She was about to go scrounge through her dirty clothes for something still clean enough, but Wake
knocked just then.

“Bree,” he called in the door after slightly opening it.

“Be right down,” she yelled.

She threw on a shirt, did up the buttons, and hurried down the stairs, collecting her boots from the
kitchen along with a quick slurp of juice from the fridge. She’d just have to deal with the pants she had on.

“Sorry, time got away from me this morning,” she apologized to Wake as she put the finishing touches on the sloppy braid she was hastily interlacing.

“Aye, and apparently, so did your clothes – those are mine,” he accused, his accent especially thick as he did so.

He tugged on the hammer loop.

“I’ve been lookin’ for them for months now – you hoarded them, admit it.”

“Yep, guilty as charged. I found them behind the lint screen in my dryer. They were hiding – from you, I would guess,” she teased.

Wake laughed as the pair of them headed outside.

“Probably,” he nodded. “…I’ll be wanting those back.”

“Now?” she shot back.

Wake suddenly went very pink.

Bree grinned at his reaction.

“You’re blushing,” she said quietly.

“Aye,” he replied softly, lifting his gaze until their eyes locked for a moment.

Bree felt a chill, but shook it off as a shiver from the breeze.
The tower was finally finished. Wake had allowed Brianna the honor of placing the final stone, and was finishing the tooling of the grout lines around it. She beamed with pride at seeing the old tower looking good as new, but still looking like it had always stood there. The true test would be when Jamie saw it, but Bree couldn’t imagine him not liking the outcome, though, as it was exactly what he’d described to her on their first tour of the place, nearly a year and a half before.

“And there you are, lass, solid and good to go for another six generations,” Wake announced, wiping his hands on the thighs of his pants.

He surreptitiously glanced at Brianna’s thighs in the pants she’d “borrowed” this morning. She unconsciously hiked her pants up, the loose waist making them feel absent, though they clung to her hips and thighs. She found his eyes and smiled. He kept the eye contact long enough to make her blush and she looked down at her own dusty hands, wiping them on her behind.

“Wanna come down to the house and clean up?” she asked. “Maybe have a drink, or something? I’ve got more cream soda.”

He often lingered after his work was done each day, but Brianna was beginning to wonder if he really didn’t like her “that way” despite all the evidence to the contrary. At the start, she’d been trying to keep their relationship strictly professional, especially considering their first personal meeting - being found naked and soaking wet had had the tendency at first to foster a level of discomfort in Bree when Wake was around, and so much friction had been generated by her failed attempt to seduce him, but there had been so many moments, fleeting glances, just since she returned from the Netherlands, and they’d gone out now a handful of times, but were those dates? She thought they were – and just now setting that final stone, he had handed it off to her, but his hands never let go, only sat side by side with hers as they placed it in the mortar.

“You should get that off your hands, lass, before they crack and bleed. When ye first do masonry, it’s hell on your skin,” he reminded her.

Bree just stood admiring the finished tower, but turned her head abruptly when his arm came around her back.

“And there you are, lass, solid and good to go for another six generations,” Wake announced, wiping his hands on the thighs of his pants.

He surreptitiously glanced at Brianna’s thighs in the pants she’d “borrowed” this morning. She unconsciously hiked her pants up, the loose waist making them feel absent, though they clung to her hips and thighs. She found his eyes and smiled. He kept the eye contact long enough to make her blush and she looked down at her own dusty hands, wiping them on her behind.

“Wanna come down to the house and clean up?” she asked. “Maybe have a drink, or something? I’ve got more cream soda.”

He often lingered after his work was done each day, but Brianna was beginning to wonder if he really didn’t like her “that way” despite all the evidence to the contrary. At the start, she’d been trying to keep their relationship strictly professional, especially considering their first personal meeting - being found naked and soaking wet had had the tendency at first to foster a level of discomfort in Bree when Wake was around, and so much friction had been generated by her failed attempt to seduce him, but there had been so many moments, fleeting glances, just since she returned from the Netherlands, and they’d gone out now a handful of times, but were those dates? She thought they were – and just now setting that final stone, he had handed it off to her, but his hands never let go, only sat side by side with hers as they placed it in the mortar.

“You should get that off your hands, lass, before they crack and bleed. When ye first do masonry, it’s hell on your skin,” he reminded her.

Bree just stood admiring the finished tower, but turned her head abruptly when his arm came around her back.

“Glad ye like it,” he toned.
“Aye, I do,” she replied, putting his accent to her best ability.

His lip twitched and he began to turn away, but before he could manage a complete retreat, she extended her lips toward him and was able to skim his lip. He moved back in and wrapped his arms around her as she grabbed him by both ears. The kiss was slow, cautious and curious. They were both starting to melt into each other when Wake pulled back and collected her hands, holding them between them.

“No,” he exhaled.

The confusion was obvious on Brianna’s face.

“Sorry,” she gulped, thinking she had her answer.

She took several steps away and turned toward the house, mapping her quickest escape.

“I’ll leave you to clean up, then.”

He could hear the tears in her voice and it stabbed at him.

She was about to dart away when he grabbed her by the wrist from behind.

“I didna mean to imply – I want to kiss you, verra much, but I don’t know that I can stop myself at just that.”

He swung around, still holding her hand, his other hand knuckling under as it touched her waist. He pulled her back against himself and jutted his chin over her shoulder.

“You drive me crazy,” he whispered.

A shiver went through Brianna and she blushed as she stood as tall as she could, bumping his chin back with her shoulder. She didn’t know what to say in reply.
“Say something, Bree.”

“Wake…” She was still wordless for the most part, but he had to speak.

“I don’t want to take things too fast for you. I’ve had a couple of long relationships, and a few regrettable encounters. I don’t want you to be one of my regrets.”

Brianna turned to face him. She felt like she might take flight, but she felt so shy. Wake read her expression and took her chin in his hand.

“After that talk, when you admitted how little experience…well, it scared me a bit. I thought it might be better to back off, but then I thought I’d lost you to someone else, and my world fell apart. There is something between us, isn’t there?”

Bree’s heart was pounding in her throat so bad she couldn’t answer with words if she could even form them in her brain. She nodded over and over, finally forcing a “Yes!” out of her mouth. Wake kissed her quick and pulled her in by the hips. He held her back just enough to scan down her body.

“God, ye look better in my clothes than I do.”

He pulled her flush, his hand slipping into the gap in the back where the men’s pants didn’t follow the woman’s body in his arms.

“Come to the house,” she invited once more.

They walked haphazardly through the yard, touching, clinging, kissing briefly, completely intoxicated with each other. When they reached the top of the steps to the house, Brianna reached for the door when Wake pressed up tight behind her.

“Wait, Bree…are you sure? We can’t take this back. I don’t want you to regret…”

“No regrets, either way. I want this.”
He pulled her back enough for them to slip through the doorway. The rooms were draped in drop cloths to protect them from the work being done. Brianna and Wake caromed from wall to wall, kissing and caressing their way from the new front door to the far end of the house.

Stopping their kissing to catch her breath, Brianna walked Wake into the study where a pallet stood piled just over knee height with the stones for fixing the remaining fireplace on the first floor. He pushed her against the pallet and sat her on the stones. He slipped into the vee of her knees and finally solidly set his lips on hers, giving her a kiss that would have weakened her knees had she been standing.

His hands were still crusty with dust and mortar, the rough patches grating her skin as his hands slipped up under her shirt. She was unbuttoning as fast as her dexterous hands would allow, and as soon as her shirt hung open, she made a move on his. She wanted to touch him, know him, be comfortable with every inch.

As his mouth travelled from her lips, it landed randomly on neck and clavicles, and Brianna was glad for the front opening clasp on her bra. She led his hand to it, and helped him release it. It separated like it was magnetically repulsed and Brianna let out a sigh of relief as his mouth moved in quickly, and the untold sensations coursed through her body.

“Oh, Wake,” she barely breathed the sounds.

He paused for a moment.

“Was that Wake or wait?” he breathily asked, hoping she wasn’t putting on the brakes already.

She shed both shirt and bra, working them off her shoulders and down her arms. Wake got enough of a clue by the time she’d worked them to her elbows, and he slid them completely loose of her. She jumped off the pile of pallet-ed stone and wrapped herself around his chest.

“Oh, God, look at you,” she mumbled as she shed the shirt from his shoulders.

He only gave her moments to ogle him as he pulled her in and started kissing her again. A few moments later his hands had found the gap at the back of her pants, and he was pressing his hands down the upper curves of her backside. She bucked him back a few inches and undid the button and short zipper of the men’s work pants. He turned her sideways to him, carefully placing his hand flat against the skin at her waist. His hand slid down her stomach, lower and lower, nothing to stop him.

Brianna tried to breathe slow and calm, but his touch had her gasping and squirming. Her shoulders began to arch backward, and he thrust his head between her breasts. It was all very unreal to her,
like a dream that would wake her feeling embarrassed as if she was dreaming about sex with her mother in the next room. But reality made its presence known as she felt a growing pressure against her hip. She couldn’t help but blush as she saw the aroused member above his own unbuttoned, unzipped work pants.

He must have gotten her shoes off while she’d been seated on the pallet, and somehow shed his own while she was otherwise distracted. This was the last chance to stop things before there’d be no reason to stop. He turned her square to himself and gave her a questioning look. She shook her head and dropped the pants off her hips to stand before him naked. He thrust his hand in the pocket of his pants, letting them fall as he kept hold of the condom he was retrieving.

They dropped into the drop cloths on the floor. Lips touched her in places she never knew they went and Wake’s hands left her trembling with anticipation.

“I’ll be gentle,” he promised.

“No,” Brianna retorted. “I’m not a child, and it’s not my first time. I want everything you can give me.”

Fear momentarily gripped Brianna as Wake clamped his hands to her hips, but she relaxed as his mouth danced from nipple to nipple and then settled powerfully on her mouth. Wake shifted her hips and took her fast. Her shoulders arched up against the unexpected pain, but he held her down. She looked shocked, but soon smiled and writhed beneath him. Brianna was riding the edge between pleasure and pain with his every move, but she seemed to be enjoying both sides.

Sensations were rushing up on her, and she had to hold still, but Wake kept moving while she all but froze in place.

Wake shuddered and groaned deeply, pulling out quickly and freeing himself from the condom. He was back by her side in a moment.

“I should have gone more gently – “

“No, I liked it like that, it’s just…not quite what I expected.”

“How so?” he asked.

“I don’t know…”

He kissed the back of Bree’s shoulder.
“Do you need me to finish you off?” he asked, his hand eagerly advancing between her legs.

He knew just where to touch and had her writhing and moaning and breathing heavily as the pulses struck her like cannon fire.

“OHH.”

“Is that more like it, then?” he asked, his breath warm against her neck.

“Wake?”

“You OK?” he asked.

“Yeah…it’s just…I’m glad it wasn’t my imagination, that you wanted me too. I was afraid —“

“And you think I wasn’t, lass? I was tied in knots from the day we met. You lying there, naked as a jay. God, I wanted to roll ye over and do what we just did. I kept hoping for there to be trouble with the tower so’s I’d have to come to you. If ye knew how many times I showered off in that cold water just to try to shake you outta my mind, just for a minute!”

She happily hummed in reply, and he could feel her slipping into sleep, her body exhausted and satisfied and her mind needing the REM sleep to put it all in perspective.

“I love you,” she mumbled.

He pulled the long red braid out of his face.

“I know,” he replied, knowing she was already asleep.

~~~~~
Brianna awoke and rolled over, realizing she was in her own bed. The red readout of the digital clock said 3:21. She swept the room with a look – Wake wasn’t there. She pulled the blanket over her shoulders like a cape and walked over to the window and looked out. A dark outline still stood where Wake’s truck was parked. She smiled and the cold pit in her stomach turned suddenly warm. She needed him…badly. There were only so many rooms he could be in, and she hoped very much he was in one of these upper floor bedrooms, and not sprawled out on the kitchen floor or something, or curled up in his truck.

She found him in a small corner bedroom, blanket emblazoned with New England Patriots helmets with logos wrapped around him. She dropped off her blanket-shawl and pulled his cover off and found he had not gotten redressed, either, though he must have gotten her to her bed, and himself here.

Brianna kneed her way onto the bed, crawling over him, carefully placing hands and knees so as not to accidentally pinch or crush any part of his anatomy. She was so fixed on not putting her hand in the wrong place that she didn’t notice Wake waking, and sucked in a breath at meeting his eyes.

“Something you need?” he asked, not looking upset in the least.

“You,” she replied, “If you can?”

“Oh, I can,” he assured, sitting enough to reach for one of the other condoms he’d been carrying.

“Did you think you were going to be having sex with me today, or do you always carry those with you?” Brianna pointedly asked.

“Like I said, I wanted to jump you since we met. I wanted to be ready if you were ever overcome with desire.”

“Smart man,” she replied, moving up to straddle his thighs.

“Um, I’ve never put one of these…” she nervously pointed at the little wrapper.

“Let me help you,” he offered, much to her relief.

She was still a bit tentative, nervous to actually have him again, and afraid of freezing up like the
first time, unsure what that had been.

“How do we…align, I mean with me on top. I don’t seem to be able…”

“Let me help you with that as well.”

The muscles in his forearms bulged as he lifted Brianna and found the right position, listening to her moan as he lowered her slowly. She bent forward and kissed Wake on the lips.

“Oh, that’s…nice,” she panted.

He traced down her flanks with the backs of his hands and turned them over to cradle her buttocks. Her breasts bobbed inches away and he craned his neck to make contact, fleeting, skin-tickling touches of his lips.

“Why didn’t you crawl into bed with me?” she whispered, slowly moving over him, her hands held tight to his hips.

“I didn’t know you’d want me in your bed.”

“I and want are the only words I heard just now.”

He reached up and wetly kissed each nipple, and stroked his hands down her thighs. Bree’s back arched just a little and she laced her hands behind her neck to pull herself back.

“Oh, god…I…I can’t move.”

He’d felt her freeze up the first time, and thought it was just nerves, but it was happening again, as Brianna somehow seemed to be stopping herself from finishing. Wake slid his hands up to the small of her back and pulled himself up using her as his counterbalance. They were lip to lip, chest to chest, and deeply connected.

“Don’t think,” he whispered, their eyes now locked on each other.
His hands travelled even higher, clinging to her shoulders, and her arms slowly dropped, her hands settling on his biceps.

“I’m sorry,” she spoke right into his mouth as he pulled her in for a kiss.

She didn’t even let him finish her off this time. After he finished she moved off him and rolled to the far edge of the mattress. Brianna wasn’t crying, but her breathing wasn’t easy, either, catching as she began each exhale.

“Can I tell you something?” he quietly asked.

“I guess…”she hesitantly replied, fearing the next words she would hear.

“I don’t know what it is you got up to when you were sixteen, but to judge by the drop cloths downstairs, I went where no man had gone before.”

“Really?” Brianna rolled up on her elbow facing Wake.

“I don’t know that that changes anything, now. I mean, we…have gone there…twice now,” he toned, “but is there any chance that’s why you…freeze up? Something that happened then, that’s in your mind, conscious or not?”

“Well, it could be. It’s nothing you’re doing, I know that, or at least I think so. It did hurt more than I expected last time, but I was past that, both times, when I froze. I don’t want it to happen. I don’t want to be a regret,” she sadly spoke, closing her eyes to hold back her tears.

“NO,” he emphatically stated, rolling from his back to face Brianna on the bed.

“I do not regret one minute, one second, of being with you, and if you think I’d give up this quickly,” he vaulted up over her, holding himself above Brianna.

Her eyes opened again as she felt his movements by the shifting of the mattress. “I’m going to have
to teach you otherwise."

“But I’ll need a few minutes,” he added, starting to smile.

Wake dropped down and kissed Bree over the navel and her hand went to the back of his head. She smiled as he hummed “love you” against her skin, and his breathing shifted into the comfortable pace of sleeping.

~~~~~

Brianna woke to a barely there touch running the length of her thigh. She shifted her shoulders and ran her hand down Wake’s back.

“Are you expecting anyone to work on the property today?” he asked.

“Nope. You’re the only one on the property,” she replied with as much innuendo as she could voice, her fingers tip-toeing toward his spine. “Why?”

“Didn’t want any interruptions,” he told her, piratical smile taking over his face.

She studied him in the morning light, suddenly feeling completely comfortable and wonderfully familiar with the man in her arms.

“You look downright devilish,” she said, touching the triangular sprout of beard on his chin.

“Feel that way, too,” he murmured, moving up to kiss Bree’s ear.

Wake pushed himself back and began to look at Brianna intently. She studied his eyes and touched the corners of his smile with a soft touch.

“What is it?” she wondered aloud.
“I’ve had images like this in my mind since I found you by the mill. Thoughts of my hands on,” his eyes quickly surveyed her breasts, “you. You are a rare woman, Brianna Fraser. I’d be a damned fool to let you get away – and I almost was.”

“But you didn’t,” she spoke caressingly, her hands sliding off his face, stopping as she reached the hair on his chest.

She’d seen it many times as he often doffed his shirt while working on the tower. Brianna was loathe to admit the number of times she’d watched from a distance while he worked, the dark patch of hairs in contrast to his rather pale skin. She found her hands on it during the course of events last night, but she had not lingered over it. Now, with time to investigate, she was getting the feel of the texture, and the extent of the area it covered. Roughly heart-shaped, covering mainly his pectorals – nicely developed from his manual labors – the hair’s feel reminded her of a soft pot scrubber she used at her sink.

Brianna’s face went a bit pink as she wondered about the rest of Wake’s body hair. Her eyes twinkled as she flashed them back up, momentarily catching a feral green glow. The urge to kiss her was too strong and his mouth attacked, even forcing her head back a bit. Last night it would have scared her, put her on her heels, but not now. His hands began to wander again, but his lips were teaching Bree a thing or two about what a good kiss could do.

When his mouth finally shifted southward, she thrust her chest forward.

“Oh, God, oh, yes, please,” she gurgled as Wake’s tongue tickled a trail between her breasts.

Her hips involuntarily bucked. Wake continued to take his time, bringing each nipple to peak and getting her hips to buck a number of times. He also gave her a full tour of his body, putting her hands on him in places he wanted her to touch, and she got her answers about the rest of the hair on his body. She reached up and stroked several fingers through his chestnut locks.

“You’ve not cut it since you started work here,” Bree commented.

“I like it longer on you – gives you a roguish air – that little hint of unpredictability.”

“Me? An unpredictable rogue?”

Wake pulled her tight and kissed her hard, leaning her back quickly.
“I guess you’re right then, lass. Shall I go on being unpredictable?”

“Oh, yes please,” Brianna breathily responded.

Wake wanted to get Brianna beyond the point of words, or even conscious thought, thinking that it might allow her to enjoy sex without any hindering. He’d had flashes almost every day while working on the tower of the two of them hitting the heights of passion while thumping around the walls and floors of that ancient structure. If she wanted unpredictable, this would fill the bill.

“Come on, grab the blankets,” he instructed her, pushing off the bed and pulling her up.

Brianna gave Wake a puzzled look, but wrapped one blanket around her shoulders and threw the other one at him. They jogged down the stairs and into the study.

“Slip on your shoes, Aye? It’s a bit too tough for bare feet.”

She was getting a hint of Wake’s intent. The thought of rough stone at her back and a ready man in her arms had fueled more than one dream, and excitement welled up in the pit of her stomach. The lower yard was still in shadow, and rather cool even on a spring morning, but as they walked toward the tower, they came into the light. Dampness pricked their skins as they hurried to their sanctuary, hoping it would provide the proper salvation.

Wake flung the door open and they stumbled into the tower, already kissing and groping at each other in desperation. Bree threw her blanket off and grabbed the one girding his loins as well, piling them on the floor. She moaned in delight as they embraced, unfettered, repeating the sound with each kiss they shared. Beyond words.

They dropped to their knees on the blankets, Brianna rolling Wake to his back and kissing her way down his torso until he wrestled her to her back, knees bent high in the air. Wake kissed his way up one inner thigh as his hand stroked up the other one until Bree couldn’t even lift her head. Beyond thought.

Wake barely had the presence of mind to deploy the condom, but knew a ‘scare’ was the last thing Brianna needed to help her relax when it came to sex. Brianna’s eyes were liquid pools of fire as Wake looked into them and held himself just above her. She arched her back and shifted her pelvis up, her body begging for what she could not articulate.

His first thrust rocked her backward and she bent up to crush her chest to his, wanting to feel him everywhere. Moans, sighs and cries of pleasure echoed through the tower. The tingling began in her toes, but rose quickly through Brianna’s body. Her hands clawed and clung to Wake’s shoulders, but she moved with him, moved against him. The deep guttural sound came as if from a woman possessed, but rose in pitch with each release of breath.
By the time Wake joined her in the consuming pleasure, they sounded like they were burning alive, and writhed in the same manner.

~~~

Wake woke expecting to be surrounded by rubble and ashes. He came to finding himself face down, slowly turning his head to Brianna’s last known whereabouts. She had rolled to her side, taking the edge of the blanket with her, and was burrito wrapped by his side.

Her eyes opened at his first touch, but she wasn’t sure she could speak even now. She smiled and her face beamed red.

“Wow,” was all he said at first.

Their hands found each other’s, caressing and enmeshing.

“I didn’t freeze,” Brianna triumphantly pointed out.

“No, but if I’d known what I was about to unleash, I might have. Jesus, woman, ye nearly cremated me…and my ears are still ringing. God…when can we do that again?”

Brianna laughed, but it was borne of relief. She’d enjoyed herself fully, and was glad to hear he wasn’t running for the hills after they nearly spontaneously combusted.

~~~

The yard was fully sunlit when they came back down to the house.

“I’m gonna take a nice, hot shower,” Brianna purred, stretching her hands over her head, almost losing the blanket wrapped around her.

“Join me,” she added, turning and touching Wake lightly on the chest.
He held her for a moment, kissed her, but held her back.

“I shouldn’t, Bree. I’m gonna douse myself with the outside shower instead.”

“Cold water?” she smiled.

“Trust me, I still need it after this morning.”

“Would you like me to towel you off?” she offered. “

We’ll be back where we started if you do.”

Brianna smiled coyly at Wake, still clinging to him.

“I don’t want to let go,” she said with a gulp. “It’s like the last twenty-four hours will cease to exist if I let you out of my sight.”

“Not a chance,” he countered. “I’m afraid you’re stuck with me…” Wake kissed her lingeringly. “Now go, have your shower.”

He kissed her again and backed her toward the house.

“I’ll be here.”

She took each step into the house and turned to watch him after every one. He meandered his way to the outside, gravity-feed cold water shower that jutted out of the side of the house. She had reached the top step as the first of the water struck Wake’s skin. His muscles contracted, fists clenched, but he held in any sound.

~~~~~
Brianna took each step one foot at a time on her way down after her shower. The navy knee length shorts showed off her long, pale, lower limbs. She moved like a panther surveying her hunting ground, confidently padding toward sounds in the kitchen. Wake did a double-take as Brianna came into sight.

“Christ, woman, I thought ye’d come down naked – not that I’d mind.”

On a glance, her light tan tank shirt could look a little “fleshy”.

“Disappointed that I’m not?” she toned with a smile.

“A bit… Hungry?” he asked, tending to a pan on the stove.

“Starving – but I didn’t have anything but leftovers in the fridge.”

“Ye had plenty, you just didn’t know how to put them together,” Wake advised.

“Here, try this.” He said offering her a bite.

Brianna took a tentative forkful and then eyed Wake with amazement.

“My God – you are the perfect man!” she gushed.

Wake smiled sheepishly.

“I’m no perfect – but I believe I’m quite serviceable.”

Brianna giggled at his modesty and worked her way around into his arms.

“Quite,” she replied.
Wake was sitting at one end of the couch, feet up on the coffee table whose base had once been an actual wagon wheel. Brianna’s legs stretched down to the other end of the couch, her body calmly crossed perpendicularly on his, as they faced each other. Her hair hung loose in great rope-like waves around her face and shoulders and down her back where Wake was playing with it, his fingers curling and raking through the thick tresses. The look of bliss on Brianna’s face new and wonderful, smile curling and eyes secretly glimpsing Wake, and then dropping her head down to rest on his chest and exhale in near moans.

She smoothed her right hand up from Wake’s chest, rising to his left shoulder and then traced down his arm. His left arm came around her back and his right arm came around from the other side, fingers slipping up and collecting Bree’s hair at the nape. A thought pondered came pouring out of Brianna’s mouth without checking with her brain first.

“Would it be easier to finish the fireplaces if you were staying here?”

Wake tilted his head back to get the full picture of her face.

“Why, Brianna Fraser, are you asking me to move in with you already?”

Her face went bright pink and her eyes rounded. Her mouth worked, but no words came out at first.

“You’d have your own room,” she stuttered, “And…and…”

“And I’d never use it, lass,” he informed her, popping a kiss on her quivering lips… “Relax,” he said, stroking her cheek. “I don’t know if it would make the work any easier, but I would love to be here with you. One condition, though – you get some real food in here.”

“If you’ll cook it. I’m better at desserts. I make an orgasmic brownie…” Brianna’s voice trailed off as she realized her word choice.

Wake sat forward and held her tighter.
“I look forward to sampling it,” he purred, and they kissed.

After a quiet moment in each other’s arms, Wake offered, “I’ll get the food we’ll need when I get some clothes from my apartment…despite wanting to spend every minute with you naked.”

~~~~~

Brianna was nervous as she entered her bedroom. She sat in front of the mirror that stood behind the desk. It was floor-length, but the lower portion was obscured. Bree set to braiding her hair so it wouldn’t become a wild mess while she slept. She heard the toilet flush one floor down and let out a noisy breath, turning to face the door. Wake came into the room the next minute.

“So they fit?” she asked, looking at the sweat pants she’d loaned him for the night.

“A little short, but they’ll do,” he answered, sitting on the bed and lifting up on his arms to push himself toward the head of the mattress.

“They were never full length on me, either,” she smiled. Brianna was looking around, her breathing a little shallow.

“What is it, lass?” Wake finally asked, pulling the blanket out from under himself so he could pull the covers up.

“Um…I’ve never…slept – actually gone to bed to sleep – with someone…other than my mom,” Bree hesitantly revealed. “I know it’s ridiculous…after yesterday.”

Wake got himself covered, then dropped open a flap of blanket, inviting her to join him with a pat of the mattress and a soft smile.

“Not ridiculous at all,” he smiled with his reply. “Anything ye’ve never done before can be… daunting.”

His words both calmed her nerves and sent shivers down her spine. Brianna landed and spun her legs up into the open space. Wake flung the blanket over her and began settling down into the
pillows on his back. She nestled her head and rolled part way onto her right hip, facing him. Her feet crossed the imaginary center line of the bed, wrapping around Wake’s lower left leg. He carefully slipped an arm around Brianna’s shoulder, and she placed her arm across his chest.

“God, ye’re warm,” he whispered.

“My mom says I’ve always run a little hot – almost a hundred degrees...she says my Dad was – is - always warm too, and figures that’s where I get it from.”

Wake gave her a quick squeeze.

“Good thing to have for cold winter’s nights.”

She tried to settle down, hoped to feel the call to sleep, but it was elusive this night. Bree could feel Wake’s breathing and knew he wasn’t drifting off either.

“So…” She broke the silence. “Where did you learn to cook like that?”

“Oh, I’ve been helpin’ in the kitchen since I was hangin’ onto me mam’s apron strings. Soon as she thought I’d do more good than harm with a knife, she set me to work. T’was a time I was evenly split between Architecture and Culinary school. Mam made me realize I didn’t need the degree to enjoy cooking.”

The silence crept over them again and Brianna let out a deep breath.

“It’s not working,” Bree alerted, leaving Wake alarmed.

“I can’t sleep on this side of the bed.”

Wake released the breath he had sucked in fearfully.

“That’s all you mean?” he asked.
“What did ya think? Really, you’re worse than I am. Now move over so I can have that spot.”

Wake grasped Bree tightly around the waist and lifted her up and over himself, placing her on his other side and scootching over a few inches on the mattress. As they detangled the blanket, Wake couldn’t help but watch Brianna move, his heart pounding in his chest.

“I can’t help feeling a bit insecure. I look at you, and I can’t believe…”

Brianna could see the emotions welling up in Wake’s face and she touched his cheek.

“I gave myself to you. That wasn’t a casual decision to me, and you better know, while it may take me some time to come to a decision, I seldom change my mind.”

Wake smiled and nodded. Bree smiled back, pulled the blanket over her shoulder and settled against Wake’s chest. Brianna yawned and sighed as she came up to temperature. Yawns being contagious, Wake was soon overcome by the need, turning his face away as he fought not to unhinge his jaw.

“Good night, my lover,” reverberated just audibly from Wake’s vocal chords.

A delighted hum emitted from Brianna’s throat.

“Hmmm…my lover. I like how that sounds.”

“My lover,” he repeated in a whisper, lulling them both to the edge of sleep.

~~~

Brianna woke, soon realizing where she was and with whom. There was a man in her bed, and he was warm, welcoming, and…aroused?
“Really?” she questioned, half asleep.

“Sorry, lass, it’s no all down to you, though, and it’ll be the mornin’ it doesna happen that should worry you.”

“Oh,” she started to laugh, “so that’s what that meant,” she mumbled.

Wake looked at her, confused.

“Just a conversation I remember over-hearing in one of my male dominated classes a while back. They called it ‘morning wood’, and I knew they weren’t talking about construction materials…So it’s a real thing?”

“Well, I never called it that, but it is a fact of life.”

Wake slowly rolled Brianna from her side to her back.

“It can come in handy if you’re feelin’ frisky in the mornin’,” Wake intoned.

“I haven’t quite reached ‘frisky’ – I…I do want to do it again, but…” her voice trailed off.

“We went pretty hard at it. I’m a little sore myself, so I can imagine you might…be feeling…”

“Like a Mack truck drove between my legs?” Bree charged.

“If that’s a comment on my size, I thank ye for the comparison, but I’d say I’m more a mid-size SUV – more than big enough to do the job, but with surprising agility and handling.”

“You’ve given that way too much thought ahead of time,” she teased.

Wake smirked.
“Sorry you’re hurtin’,” he hummed.

“Would you like me to kiss it and make it better?” he snickered.

Brianna drew her chin back into her neck and sprouted an uneasy and questioning look.

“No,” Bree retorted, her nose scrunching up.

“Don’t knock it until you’ve let me try it.” Wake rumbled, dropping a kiss on her lips.

“Don’t hold your breath,” she dictated, turning her back on him.

~~~~~

Wake commandeered a small grocery trolley and made quick work of collecting all the items on his mental list of foods and ingredients he and Brianna would need in the next week. She’d asked him if he wanted her to come along, but he’d declined to take her with him.

“Not this time,” he’d told her, kissing her through the fully open truck window. “I won’t be long.”

The taste of her kiss and the feel of her lips had Wake in a bit of a daze as he reached the checkout.

“New girlfriend then?” a voice asked, shaking him out of his trance. He smirked sheepishly.

“Why would ye ask that, Albie?” he replied to the bag boy.

“Well, ye’re buying enough food for one of our family gatherings, so if you were buying just for yourself it would go to waste, Uncle. Not to mention, word has it you’ve not been seen back to your apartment in several days.”
“Seems the village grapevine grows right through your family, Wake,” the checker commented.

“Mrs. Mackintosh, I thought you took care of that kind of gossip.”

“Oh, I do, when there’s no chance of truth in it. But your nephew’s got ye pegged. So is this one a keeper?”

Wake leaned in close to her ear.

“She is that,” he whispered. “But you’ll always be the apple of my eye, lassie.”

Mrs. Mackintosh swatted dismissively at Wake’s sleeve.

“You are such a flirt, Wake MacKenzie.”

He smiled broadly, made his purchases, and fled with his groceries before a more in-depth interrogation could commence. Wake looked around cautiously before crossing diagonally to the Chemist.

“Come away from the windows,” Mrs. Mackintosh commanded of her bagger.

“He’s gone across the square,” the boy reported with a blushing smile. “You know what that means!”

“One track teenage mind, that’s what you’ve got. A trip to the chemist can be for any number of things!”

“Not when he’s got a new girlfriend, it doesn’t.”

~~~~~
Wake arrived back at Lallybroch and brought his purchases into the house. He went about his work methodically, filling fridge, freezer and cupboards. Brianna hadn’t come to see what he’d gotten, and Wake was stopping every few minutes to look for her approach, even going so far as the foot of the stairs.

Finally finished putting anything perishable away, he tucked the purchase from the chemist into his pocket and made his way up the steps, nervous anticipation rumbling in the pit of his stomach. He found Brianna in the hall between their bedroom and the stairs to the second floor where the bathroom was located.

“I was getting ready to shower-” Bree began, but Wake grabbed her head, thumbs stroking each cheek bone, and pulled her into a withering kiss.

“God, I want you,” Wake hissed.

Brianna’s cheeks burned red, almost feeling a touch embarrassed at his statement. He quickly released her face and untied her robe, pulling her naked body against his clothes.

“What’s gotten into you,” Brianna whispered, then allowed herself to be pulled into another kiss of great passion as his hands slid under her robe and around her waist.

“You were only away for an hour, maybe a little more,” she informed him, “What happened?” she asked, moving in to tease his lips.

“I think I’m addicted to you,” he said by way of an explanation.

“Oh,” Bree replied, and then, “OOH,” she reacted to Wake’s continued attentions to her body.

“So it’s not just me?” Brianna whispered, “Thank God. I thought I was losing my mind. The moment your truck was out of sight… I wanted you so bad.”

Wake wrapped his arms tightly around her and lifted her off her feet enough to carry her back to their room. He set her down at the foot of the bed and his eyes devoured her, making goose bumps rise all over her skin.

“Do you think you’re ready, lass, to go again?”
“I certainly hope so, because I want you.”

Wake placed a splayed hand on the base of her skull and pulled her into yet another kiss. Brianna was nimbly unbuttoning his shirt while he was nibbling her neck and clavicles. She was barely keeping her feet. Bree peeled the sleeves down his arms, her lips on his, but her body pulling away, shifting their weight toward the bed.

She stood, panting, patches of hot and cold rippling through her body as her robe fluttered on either side. Bree felt like the world had shifted into slow-motion. She felt Wake slide the robe off her, watching as it caught on the air and soared in an elegant arc to the floor beside the bed. She felt herself land on the mattress, and Wake’s weight slowly pressing her down. A tangle of limbs wrapped and unwrapped forming kaleidoscopic patterns as they brought each other to life.

Brianna released a deep breath and let a great groan.

“Did I hurt you, lass?” Wake inquired, seeing the slack jawed expression and closed eyes.

“No,” she breathily responded, “Just the opposite…If I’d known how good this feels, I wouldn’t have wasted the last eighteen months. I’d have tied you to my headboard the first day we met and kept you here.”

Wake planted a kiss on her lips.

“The tower wouldna have gotten done,” he informed her, matter-of-factly.

“No, but I would have!”

They smiled broadly at each other, breathing starting to intensify as Brianna anticipated what was to come. Wake’s movements were strong and sure and Brianna’s vocalizations were intensifying, sounding like a seagull calling into the wind. One arm wrapped around Wake’s neck, the other started out clawing her own kneecap, but traveled randomly as the sensations in her body seemed to move her at its own direction.

Brianna felt the wave about to overtake her, and knew that as loud as she had been to this point, it was likely to hit even higher decibel levels in the coming minutes. She closed her fingers tight together and covered Wake’s ears as she tilted her head back and let out several shrill cries of passion at full volume. Her whole body vibrated, and she crossed her legs around Wake’s back as the room fell silent at long last.
With the difficulty of over-taxied lungs and scratchy throat, Brianna pulled her hands from Wake’s ears and croaked out, “I’m sorry I’m so loud.”

He smiled as he locked onto her eyes.

“Don’t fash, lass, at least I know you’re enjoying yourself,” he soothed, a quickly applied kiss seeming to relax her fears.

Brianna let out a breath and dropped her head to the pillows.

“Can it get better than this?” Bree emanated, almost afraid anything could be more intense.

“Does it have to?” Wake burred, hint of humor in his tone.

“No,” she exhaled, “but each time it gets more… you know?” she affirmed. “I don’t know if I can take it if it gets… stronger.”

Wake puffed a soft laugh.

“You’re strong enough to take anything. It’s more likely you’ll do me in, lass.”

Wake flopped onto his back, still mildly laughing.

“That’s not funny,” Brianna chastised. “I don’t want to kill you, and especially not with sex!”

He turned and smirked lovingly at Bree.

“God, ye’re gorgeous – a goddess,” he purred, reaching out and smoothing his hand down Brianna’s side.
Her skin turned pink starting at her scalp and working its way to her toes.

“Don’t change the topic,” she complained, looking at Wake’s face and then shyly scanning down his body before she snapped her eyes shut.

“Why, Brianna Fraser, you’re embarrassed to look at me. Help me understand, then, how you can devour me with your eyes while we are having sex, but become so shy right after.”

Brianna turned to her side with her back facing Wake. She buried her face in the pillows to try to chill the burning of her cheeks. Wake reached an arm around her waist and pulled himself tight in behind her.

“My bold lass,” he whispered, “I want to know everything about who you are and what you’re thinking. Why do you avert your eyes when we both know that’s no what you want to do?”

He could see her cheek peek above her face as she smiled. Brianna shifted around to look him in the face once more. She was brighter red than he’d ever seen before. Her eyebrows were high, like they were trying to crawl over the top of her head, and her eyes were blazing.

“You’ve gotta understand, I was raised in New England. There’s still a LOT of Puritanical thinking and attitudes. And…as much as I want to stare at your naked body…” She stopped, looked down and nervously licked her lips, “Part of me will…always feel a little dirty when I do.”

Brianna nervously twitched her shoulders and looked up into the rafters of the room, her chin pointing at Wake. With a growling approach, he moved in and kissed the underside of her jaw.

“Well, we have only been naked together the four times. I think you’ll do fine after a little exposure therapy.”

Before she could reply, he silenced her with a kiss, rolled to his back and pulled Brianna in close.

“I’ll have ye ogling my body, and thinking terrible sexy thoughts about me in no time, just you wait and see.”
Afterglow

Chapter Notes

This is the 4 year anniversary of the creation of the file that became Outlander Forever - thankyou all for finding your way here. As for the next chapter, sorry Orri - this one is all Wake and Brianna too, but I am working on an all Claire, Jamie Alex chapter just for readers like you who just want their J+C.

Afterglow

Bree woke to the feeling of Wake’s hands molded to each of her breasts. She smiled, realizing she liked the feel of his hands on her like that. There was something reassuring about the way it felt to come out of a sound sleep and know there was a tangible presence of the man she loved. He hadn’t just nodded off in the wake of sexual conquest, leaving them lying side by side.

“Hmm…I think I could get used to waking up like this,” Brianna murmured, placing her hands on top of Wake’s.

“And I can finally stop taking all those cold showers,” he whispered into her ear.

A harmonic hum of a laugh rippled from Brianna, and then a sigh.

“Or not,” she teased.

“Since the day I found you by the mill, no other woman has caught my eye, or been in my head. Even the months you were back in America – every time we spoke, or Skyped, I found myself under the showerhead, pouring the iciest water over me, and still I’d feel the heat of you.”

“You’re embarrassing me,” Bree said as she began to squirm, and tried to move his hands.

“And in a perfect world, I’d never have to let go of you for a second…but…” he sadly exhaled, sliding his hands down to surround Brianna’s waist.

She looked over her shoulder and grinned at Wake, seeing the most plaintive look on his face and finding it ever so endearing.

“We…don’t have to get up yet, do we?” Bree sing-songed, rubbing her hands over Wake’s.

“It’s a bank holiday, so we have one more day of grace before the workers return.”

“Well then,” Brianna growled, turning in Wake’s arms, “I guess we should make good use of our remaining time alone.”

“I guess we should,” he burred in return, then began kissing her as they became further entwined.

“Hmmm,” Wake hummed, “My God you smell like sex,” he told Bree as his hands wandered around one of her finest ‘ass-ets’.

“Sex has a smell?” she countered. “What does it smell like?”
“Well, I canna describe it, really. There’s hints of desire, satisfaction – a whole pheromone cocktail that lets ye know you’ve…done something amazingly life-affirming – and makes ye want to do it again…and again. You are bathed in the perfume of sex, and I am helpless to fight its effects.”

“Don’t fight it,” Brianna instructed him.

~~~~~

Wake was more than happy to share his cooking skills with Brianna. He stepped up behind her, Bree turning to look over her shoulder at Wake.

“Am I doing something wrong?” she asked, eyes filling with insecurity.

Wake smiled.

“No a thing,” he assured her, placing his hands lightly on each of her hips.

“I was just thinkin’ that we’ve satisfied one need…well, quieted it for a bit anyway…”

He kissed her cheek and brushed the tip of his nose back through the wisps of hair above her ear, moaning at the moment he squeezed his hands tighter around her middle.

“And now, we can satisfy our…other hunger.”

Brianna blushed and even giggled a bit. A feeling overwhelmed her. She was scared by how much she was feeling for Wake. For all intents, this was Brianna’s first ‘adult’ relationship, and while she held no doubts about Wake’s feelings for her, and they by no means rushed into their relationship, there had been an odd leap directly into domesticity. Wake could tell her mind was elsewhere, but simply stayed wrapped around her, standing in silent support while Brianna tended to the pan on the stove under his supervision.

~~~~~

Wake and Brianna ate in relative silence. He’d look at her and see her mind deeply engaged in thoughts to which he was not privy. His heart was thumping just a hair quicker than normal, wondering what could be so completely absorbing. When both their plates had been emptied, Wake patted his hand over Bree’s and cleared the table while she just sat there, mind still roiling.

When Wake came back, he put his hands on both of Bree’s shoulders.

“What’s troubling you? – You’ve been…gone since we sat to eat.”

“I know,” she said, turning her head so one cheek pressed against Wake’s hand.

“I’m sorry. I was just…thinking.”

“Aye,” he softly said, obviously concerned.
Brianna shivered slightly and Wake took his hands from her shoulders.

“I think I’ll go up and get my sweatshirt,” she said as she stood.

“No, come…I’ll stoke the fire, and we can talk.”

Wake extended Brianna a hand and she slipped her fingers up his palm and quickly clasped her fingers over his, and she nodded shyly.

~~~~~~

Brianna grabbed a blanket, wrapped it around her shoulders and settled on the hearth, knees pulled up to her chin as she watched Wake probe through the ashes to find an active ember. A fine trickle of smoke came up as the last orange coal was hit with the air. Wake criss-crossed several small twigs over the ember and waited for the flame to ignite, soon building it up.

The fire slowly growing behind them, Wake turned his attention to Brianna.

“Talk to me,” he implored, settling down next to her.

Brianna looked out through a cave opening of thickly hanging bangs.

“For most of my life, it’s just been mom and me. She brought a few men home, but I knew none of them were really important to her. But…I saw a side of my mother I never knew as soon as Jamie came back into her life. The way they love each other – it’s scary. I mean, I figured I’d find somebody, sometime, but…seeing what my mom and dad have – I didn’t think I…could find that for myself…And then I met you.”

She looked up and took his hand.

Wake moved in closer and slid an arm around Brianna’s back. Her free hand curled around the nape of his neck and she released his hand and brushed her thumb down his cheek as his freshly released hand caressed her right shin.

She blinked her eyes shut for a long couple of seconds, dropping her head as she lifted her lids.

“It’s just been all so quick,” she continued.

Wake began to open his mouth, but Bree shook her head gently side to side and slid her hand over his mouth.

“Let me finish?” she asked, Wake nodding his compliance.

Bree looked down, taking a deep breath.

“Like I said, it’s been so quick…but…I wouldn’t change a thing. I always imagined myself spending my twenties playing the field…seeing what was out there, and seeing if I had a wild side, but…I don’t need to sow any wild oats. I don’t need time…I don’t need…anything but you. The only thing that scares me more than how I feel about you, is how I would feel if I lost you. I love you the way my mom loves my dad. I love you in a way I…I never thought I would feel about anyone…And I’m terrified I might screw it up.”

Brianna blushed and bit her lip as she finally allowed herself to make eye contact with Wake after knowing she would not have been able to say such words to him while looking in his eyes just now.
“Oh, Brianna,” he gulped, pulling her close and touching their cheeks together. “I love you, and nothing will change that…EVER.”

“I know. I just wanted you to know…any doubts I, or you, might have felt…I know I’m young. Many would say I’m too young to understand ‘forever’. But I’ve seen and learned so much these last two years…about the world…about myself in particular. There are some things about me – “

“I look forward to learning everything about you,” Wake interrupted her words. “I want to spend my whole life getting to know you.”

~~~~~

They settled together on the hearth, Bree leaning against him, and they watched the flames. Wake kept her arms wrapped up in the blanket, and kept her tightly held to his chest. He was so happy he wanted to cry. Wake hadn’t been the same since the day he found Brianna by the mill. He’d been a man with a purpose, and then a shattered man, and then a man with renewed hope. And now Wake MacKenzie was a man with everything within his grasp.

As the flames subsided, Brianna turned toward Wake and smiled shyly. She reached her head up and kissed Wake softly, followed by a sigh. She contentedly nestled against him, closing her eyes. Her trust in him was absolute. Wake closed his eyes, too, and let the tears crawl down his cheeks, relieved that her introspection during their meal was not about doubt, but that like him, she was struck with overwhelming emotion.

The rest of the afternoon was spent lingering by the hearth. Wake held her, sitting on the edge of the raised hearth until his entire lower half went numb. He held onto her as he slithered over the edge and down to the floor. Bree barely stirred as Wake shifted himself into a position that would allow him to regain his circulation, only seeming to come alert when he kissed her on the temple.

“Hmm?” she hummed, soon smiling at him with her eyes open no more than slits.

“Nae bother, lass,” he responded, kissing her temple again.

Bree smiled and nestled again, like a cat engrossed in a sun spot. The only thing missing was a purr.

~~~~~

Wake entered the bedroom as Bree was bent over taking off her boots. She was sitting on the corner of the bed, still fully clothed, but Wake walked up to her with a look of desire in his eyes.

“How am I supposed to keep my mind on work, knowing this is waiting for me?” he burred, approaching her, slowly backing her shoulders down to the mattress. He kissed her slowly, wantonly, exhaling deeply as their lips parted.

“And how am I supposed to get any work done if you keep me on my back all the time?” Brianna replied as her arms wrapped around his shoulders.

Without warning, Wake leveraged her body on top of his.

“You can always be on top…any time."
Bree smiled wickedly as she looked down at his smiling face.

“God, you are so beautiful,” Wake murmured, his lips preparing to kiss her yet again.

Bree met him halfway, kissing him as she perched atop him. She looked into his eyes as she pushed back from his lips. Her hands were still pressed strongly down on his shoulders, her fingers brushing at his neck.

“I love you, Brianna Fraser,” he said, reaching up to brush her cheek.

Her face turned bright red and the easy smile slipped off her lips. She crawled down his body enough to nestle her head on his chest. Those words were serious business when not said in the heat of passion, and they’d sent chills down her spine – not because she didn’t feel the same, but because she knew she did, and it was overwhelming.

Bree slid her hands under Wake’s back and clasped him tight. Wake knew by the way she was crushing his ribs that his words had struck a chord, but rather than push in any way for a verbal reply, he took as deep a breath as possible and held her tightly until he’d squeezed any fear out of her body.

~~~~~

The long weekend was ebbing away, but it was just the beginning for Wake and Brianna. They had each confided long held feelings and fears and Brianna was experiencing a myriad of new sensations, all confirming what she had been feeling for over a year – Wake felt as strongly for her as she did for him. That did not mean all of Bree’s fears had been canceled, however. She was still fearful and nervous that her idea of forever and Wake’s idea of forever might not be the same.

Claire had said true love was patient. If anything, Wake had shown patience – his interest never wavering from the moment he first set eyes on Brianna, nearly eighteen months earlier.

After all the times they’d shied from each other, all the times they each wanted more of the other, but were afraid it was one-sided, after each one mourned the loss of the relationship that had never been, it was a relief to be able to turn to each other, touch each other, talk about the feelings and moments that had passed between them. It now felt almost natural to fall into bed together, for sleep or sex.

Bree watched from the bedroom doorway as Wake got into the bed, arranged the pillows and blanket. She smiled seeing him once again in the borrowed sweatpants, and a feeling of relief swept over her. He certainly looked like he was there to stay. She came into the bedroom, dropping her robe off as she approached the bed, just an over-sized tee to sleep in.

~~~~~

Wake rubbed his hand up Bree’s leg.

“Hmm, smooth,” he hummed. “You shaved your legs again, among other things?” he questioned as his hand slid across her thigh into more intimate territory. Bree gasped and intercepted his hand.

“Were you thinking you’d be having sex with me or just doing routine maintenance the day we ended up together?” he said jokingly, thinking of how she’d questioned him about being prepared because he was carrying condoms during their first night together.
Bree smiled and blushed, giggling deeply in her chest.

“Maybe…subconsciously…it wasn’t planned, but…everything fell into place…and I’m glad it did.”

Bree locked her hand through Wake’s hand on her leg, drawing his arm around her waist. She reveled in the feeling of pulling him in close, exhaling as he nuzzled her neck.

“I guess we’d both thought about it, though,” he continued to hum in her ear. “I mean, considering…our accidental nakedness…all the near misses…I’d dreamed about those long stems of yours, the way they looked below the band of my sweater…the way it would feel to have them wrapped about me.”

“I had planned it…the day I kissed you the first time. I had spent hours the night before getting myself ready.”

“Well, I wouldnae want you to think less of me…but…I’d had a condom in my pocket since I picked you up at the airport.”

“Did you think I’d take one look at you and throw myself at you?”

“Well…the last couple of Skype calls were full of…promise in that direction.”

“I didn’t mean for them to be – I didn’t know until recently that that was flirting. I’ve never understood it.”

“Aye? Well, you may no understand flirting, but you are a master of it.”

Bree squeezed his hand.

“Shh,” she quieted him.

Soon they were once more asleep in each other’s embrace, letting new love wash over them.

~~~~~

Getting up and ready for work early the next morning proved to be a difficult chore. After several attempts that found them luring each other back to bed, Brianna decided it had to be a clean break.

“Up, come on. If I come back in here after my shower and you are still in my bed, I’ll just crawl back in with you.”

“Sounds good to me,” Wake murmured, smirking as he tried to pull Bree back into the bed.

“The workers will start rolling in soon!”

“Aye.”

“They can’t find us like this!” Bree exclaimed, her tone slightly panicked.

“Are you embarrassed that we had sex?” Wake teased.

Bree turned bright red.
“You are,” Wake accused humorously, sliding from under the covers to stand toe to toe with Brianna.

“No…I…”

“Yes ye are,” Wake leveled at Bree, smirking at her as he watched the emotions scroll over her expressions.

“It’s no one else’s business,” she finally said as she composed herself. Wake’s smirk softened into a smile as he scanned her lovingly.

“Right, you, go, have your shower, I’ll make the coffee.”

~~~~~

Bree heard a quick knock on the bathroom door and the steam momentarily sucked away.

“Bree?” Wake called out, “Where are my pants?”

She broke into a broad smile as the shower water sluiced over her head and down her back.

“I threw them in the wash with a few pairs of mine.”

“Did ye also happen to throw them into the dryer?” Wake almost spat out.

“I thought you were going to pick up some clothes when you went shopping?”

“Aye, I was…but I…could only think of getting back to you, so I wasna really thinking about being dressed or havin’ clothing on – will they be dry or not?”

“Should be, but they might need a second go…could you check? I’m gonna need a pair too, so if they’re dry, just pull them out to the basket and bring it all upstairs, OK?”

“I suppose you want it folded and put away as well!”

“Only if you have the time.”

Wake abruptly pulled the shower curtain aside and glared for a moment at Bree. He shook his head as he began to smile. He surged forward and gave her a hungry kiss.

“As you wish,” he whispered.

Wake leaned back and skated the curtain closed again, leaving Bree to finish showering as he went to hunt down his pants.

~~~~~

“I guess you really did miss those pants,” Bree commented as she came off the stairs and saw Wake in the off-white painters’ pants she’d been gotten out of just days before.

Wake smiled at her.
“Are you sure you’re going to be OK with me still being your boss?” Brianna asked as Wake was at the counter pouring himself a morning coffee.

He put the cup down and turned, leaning against the counter as she came into reach. Wake got his fingers around her waist and held her inches from himself. He exhaled heavily as he looked at her.

“How am I supposed to keep my hands off you when you look like that? You do know what those jeans do to me, don’t you?”

“Since the first time I saw your eyes bulge when I wore them.”

Bree wrapped her arms around his shoulders and leaned in for a kiss. Wake happily indulged her impulse, his hands slipping to caress her rear.

“God, your arse is magnificent,” he declared.

“You’re changing the subject, again. C’mon, we can’t just, you know.”

“But ‘you know’ is so much fun.”

Brianna raised an eyebrow at Wake.

“OK…I know – Out there, in front of everyone else who works for you, I will act accordingly. I won’t give ye a kiss…”

He stopped speaking and did just that.

“…I won’t take ye in my arms…”

He pulled her tighter.

“…And I won’t grope that perfect backside.”

His hands kneaded at the tightly packed jeans, finally slipping his fingers into the pockets of her threadbare denims.

“Have ye stopped wearin’ underwear all together?” he asked as he shifted his fingers side to side.

“That’s for me to know, and I’m looking forward to how you find out.”

“Anything you say, boss,” he whispered.

“God, I want to…” slipped from her lips.

Brianna pushed back from him.

“At sundown…your mine,” she hissed and then slunk away and outdoors.

~~~~~
It was just past midday. Most of the workers at Lallybroch were taking their lunch break, and Brianna figured it was as good a time as any for her to retreat to the house for a bathroom break and lunch of her own. She’d been staying out of the house as Wake had been finishing up his work on the fireplaces, and she knew herself well enough to know that continually crossing paths with Wake would just make it impossible for her to concentrate.

As she collected items from the fridge to assemble her lunch, she caught a glimpse of Wake heading outside. Her heart caught in her throat for a second, and her knees felt weak.

“Don’t,” she whispered, collecting herself before anyone could see her pink-cheeked and flustered.

Bree did all she could to push thoughts of Wake from her mind, knowing that once everyone else left for the day he would be hers the whole night through, but her mind and her body were not listening. When Wake came back into the house, Bree followed him, surprised to find herself in a room not only with Wake, but with several of the other workers who were gathering in the wide hall to enjoy each other’s company during their meal. Brianna knew this happened, but she’d forgotten until she walked into the middle of it. All eyes were turning to her.

“Something we can do for ye, Miss Fraser?” one of the older men inquired, causing Wake to turn and look questioningly at her.

“Um…yes, MacKenzie, I noticed something about one of the upstairs fireplaces, and I just wanted to point it out…but it can wait until after you’ve eaten,” she said to Wake.

“I’m done, actually. So which fireplace was this?” he asked, slightly bewildered, signaling her to lead the way.
Bree started trotting up the stairs when they reached them, and she could hear Wake’s footfalls a few steps behind. She didn’t break stride until they reached the third floor. Wake caught her up and grabbed her arm.

“What are you up to?” he whispered, maneuvering her through the doorway of their bedroom, knowing the third floor was private space, and off-limits to any worker not invited.

“Sorry, I forgot about the men who lunched in the hall, I was just hoping for a minute with you.”

Wake released her arm and put a finger to his lips to quiet her. He went back to the door and spoke loudly down the stairs, “Show me where that loose stone is and I’ll get right on it,” before closing the door and driving Bree against the side of the fireplace.

“I’m sorry – I thought I could make it through the day,” Brianna apologized, then hummed as Wake plied his lips to hers.

“You…ohh,” Wake purred, shaking his head at her.

“If you were wearin’ any other pants, I’d be strippin’ ye naked and -”

She kissed him before he could say another word.

“What am I to do with you?” Wake rhetorically mumbled.

“I have no complaints so far,” Brianna softly spoke, flicking her eyes up to look into his.

“How did I survive such temptation for so long?” Wake hissed, pulling Brianna’s body tight to his own.

Each sucked in a deep breath and released it slowly as their bodies molded to each other.
“I could tell everybody you’re sending them home,” Wake offered.

“That’s a…bit too public…I’m sorry about this…I couldn’t stand another minute without you, but I think I can get to the end of the day now.”

“I can think of something to tell them if you don’t think you can face them, but they’re more likely to think something’s up if you hide out up here.”

“Naw, just tell them what they’re already thinking – the boss lady’s a picky bitch.”

Brianna broke into a smirk as Wake’s face showed astonishment.

One lingering kiss later, Bree made her way back down stairs heading straight for the kitchen, where her incomplete lunch was waiting. She heard Wake making heavy weather of his trip back down stairs.

“Looks like I need to get back to work, boys, or I might be here all night,” he announced from the first landing.

Most of the men laughed at his comment, a couple of them shaking their heads and smirking. They’d noticed how Wake’s truck was always the first one there, and how Wake was always the last worker to leave – in fact, nobody had seen him actually leave the property since before the long weekend.

~~~

Alex’s third swim class was about to take place. Claire checked the clock in her office, imagining Jamie slipping into the pool, trying to picture Alex slapping the water as Jamie had described. She smiled, not just at the image of her two guys in the water, but at the thought of what gossip might filter back through the hospital grape vine.

~~~

Now confident he could keep control of Alex in the water, Jamie didn’t wait for the class to be
called to order before getting in. He liked having a little bit of room to spread out in. Jamie could stand on one foot and hold one knee up high enough to balance Alex with his head above water. He balanced the boy there, sometimes lowering his knee just a bit to see if Alex would take steps to keep afloat. He was amazed the first time Alex relaxed and spread out into a floating posture, keeping his nose and mouth just above the surface of the undulating water. When Jamie brought his knee back up to support Alex, the baby smiled, once more secure.

~~~~~

Claire was disappointed that there was no gossip to revel in this week. She had tried to see if the nurse and therapist she’d overheard before were lingering, but despite several unnecessary trips to the nurse’s station, she returned to her office with no new tidbits about Jamie.

~~~~~

Wake and Bree wasted no time once the workers cleared out, quietly climbing to their bedroom. They undressed each other methodically, almost studying each other. It was exquisite torture. Just getting Bree out of her tight jeans was an exercise in self-control. Wake pealed her down, revealing the thong she had on beneath. Bree smirked at the look he gave her.

“So now you know what’s under these jeans when I wear them – you like?” she coyly inquired.

“Oh, ho,” he exhaled.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she informed him, then slipped them off her hips and shimmied them down to the floor.

He stroked the length of her arms, taking her hands into his when he reached them. He kissed the back of her left hand, rolling it up to his mouth, followed by her right hand. They stood breathing each other in until neither of them could resist the pull between them. They kissed voraciously, Wake’s hands traveling over her skin, chasing the goose bumps. Sex was still full of new experiences for Bree, and Wake’s every touch was creating a heightened reaction in her. The sound and fury of the sexual tornado that epitomized their interactions touched down and was gone, leaving the couple tangled and twisted around each other, breathless and spent.

Brianna hummed joyously, then nestled her head against Wake’s shoulder, her hand slowly tracing down his chest.
“Aye?” Wake barely voiced, hoping her almost laughter was not indicative of anything he’d done, or was doing presently.

“I… just…didn’t know I’d like sex this much…I wasn’t sure I’d…ever like it, but…I like everything about being with you.”

His left hand slid down her back and pulled her closer to his side while his right hand intercepted her hand on his chest, gathered it up and kissed her knuckles, then placed her hand flat on his shoulder. He slid his hand up her arm until reaching her shoulder and pulled her halfway across his chest.

He shook his head slowly side to side as he released a sigh.

“Does that make me sound…naïve?” Bree asked, eyes peering out from her bangs.

“If it does, then it makes me naïve as well. I like everything about being with you, too…It’s almost hard to believe we’ve been doin’ this for less than a week. I feel like I’ve always known you,” he purred, tightening his grip around her body.

Bree’s skin covered with goose bumps once more, and she shivered.

“I’m sorry about this afternoon,” Bree whispered, gripping his shoulders, “I really only meant to have a moment alone with you to get me through to tonight…It’s like you’ve…unleashed something in me I have no control over, and it took over and marched me into the hall.”

“No harm done…and I can hardly begrudge ye what I wanted to do all day. Oh, lass…you fill up my thoughts,” Wake sighed, then kissed Bree on the forehead, rocking the pair of them side to side in the slightest degree.

They drowsed as they clung to each other, just enjoying the nearness and the extreme feeling of calmness being together brought to them. Wake hummed and sighed at the same time, slowly rolling to his side as he pushed Brianna to her back.

“What?” she groaned, holding tight to Wake as she became alert to her surroundings.
“I just needed to look at you. I want to know every curve of your body,” Wake informed her as his hand slid from her hip to her thigh, and then down to her knee as she slid her leg up.

As he slid his fingers back up along her inner thigh, the breath began to catch in her chest.

“Oh, God,” she gasped, wanting nothing more than to gather him into herself.

Wake enjoyed watching Bree react to his every touch, and liked it even better when she directed him where to kiss and touch her. Brianna’s confidence had grown exponentially even as it fought against her sexual shyness. He kissed his way down her chest and stomach, Bree letting him have carte blanch until he reached several inches below her navel.

“No,” she puffed, stopping him from going any lower, “I’m not comfortable with you going there.”

He exhaled heavily, but nodded his understanding, in a way, proud that she was willing to speak up and tell him what she didn’t want as well as guiding him in what she did want. But it did put a damper on their activities for the moment, until, that is, Bree took control, flipping Wake to his back and letting her hands wander wherever he would allow – which was pretty much anywhere she was brave enough to touch.

“Oh, God, Bree,” Wake groaned, his eyes shutting as his fists clenched and pounded on the mattress to his sides.

“Am…I doing something wrong?” her voice wavered.

“No, oh, no…You – Don’t stop.”

Brianna took his near incoherence as a positive sign. She was nervous as her hands wandered to places she hadn’t been brave enough to touch before. A finger traced the uniquely male muscle configurations on either side of Wake’s body leading down from his hips.

“It’s OK, Bree,” he assured her.
She shook her head and moved back up along Wake’s body.

“There’s…no hurry. I’d not have you do anything you’re no comfortable with,” he resonated, his hands traveling the length of her arms, smoothing her skin and soothing her nerves.

“I love you,” Brianna voiced, then gulped at the lump in her throat.

She’d said it while drifting to sleep after the first time they’d had sex, but never consciously, or pointedly like that. Wake softly clasped her jaw and held her gaze.

“What again,” he purred, his thumb stroking her cheek.

“I love you,” she repeated, her breathing deepening.

Wake kissed her on the lips, then stroked his thumb over those lips.

“I love you Bree,” he cooed, pulling her in for another kiss.

“Oh, God, I love you,” he professed.

The night was still young, and they made good use of the time, knowing the next day would find them unable to randomly touch or indulge in any of the wants that might overtake them.

~~~~~

Claire happily listened as Jamie recounted the events of the swim class.

“He’s got a new word – Wah – he says it every time he slaps the water now. I’ve kept telling him ‘water’ when he points or slaps at it – I think he made the connection this time.”

“He’s a clever boy – and he’s going to be quite a handful as he grows if he takes after you,” Claire
imparted, placing a light kiss on Jamie’s cheek and then leaning in to kiss Alex as well.

“Ooh, he smells of chlorine, Jamie. It could give him a rash. I’ll give him a bath – the closest we’ll ever get to the pool together,” Claire said with a sigh.

Jamie placed a hand on Claire’s back, letting her know he understood the lingering feelings of disappointment about not going to the pool with their son. He let Claire lead Alex through his ablutions, leaving them alone together for the bonding time she felt she was missing out on. The shallow baby tub barely held enough water to get the boy half wet or to wet the wash cloth Claire was using to gently wipe his skin with warm fresh water, but somehow, Alex found a small pooling of water and gave it a mighty slap, sending a tidal wave up into Claire’s face, yelling “WAH” as he did so. He continued to pat his hand in the water, chanting “wah, wah, wah.”

Claire started to laugh despite the fact that there was water running down her face and dripping off her hair, soaking into her shirt.

“You have learned a new word,” Claire happily expressed.

She dabbed the running droplets off her face and neck, caught between utter joy and absolute despair. He was growing and learning without her, and that was wonderful. Jamie was getting to see his son’s developing personality, all the little things, all the quirks that would mark his persona. Claire remembered well burning those moments with Brianna into her mind. The tears came to her eyes despite her best efforts.

“You’ll be talking up a storm in no time,” she tearfully predicted, taking a moment to calm herself. She finished wiping Alex down and got him wrapped in a towel, carrying him into the bedroom.

“Looks like Alex gave you a bath instead,” Jaime quipped, the lightness in him dimming as he saw the moisture in Claire’s eyes.

“Crying?” he asked.

“Just a little. It snuck up on me. I thought I was over my envy about you taking him to the pool.”

“And then he took you for a swim?” Claire nodded.
“I guess I’ve talked about wanting to go to the pool with Alex enough for him to try to make it happen,” Claire said, trying to brighten her tone.

“Aye, he’s a smart one.”

~~~~~

Bree jerked slightly as she awoke to the feeling of Wake’s touch on her skin.

“Something wrong?” he asked, concerned that she was jumpy from his fingers skimming her skin.

“I’m just not used to waking up to someone,” she explained, turning to look at him over her shoulder.

She looked longingly at him before giving her next thought voice.

“But I’d like to be,” she shyly dared.

Wake leaned in to kiss her.

“As long as you’ll have me,” Wake murmured, his lips moving back into a kissing shape almost before he was done speaking.

He pulled his arms more tightly around Brianna and snuggled his head in the crook of her neck. Bree knew by the warmth in his voice that Wake wasn’t being humorous or flippant. He meant exactly what he said.

~~~~~

Several major parts of the restoration had been completed come mid-afternoon on Friday, and rather than have the men launch into new projects with only hours left in the work week, Bree
proudly announced an early end to the work day.

“I am so thrilled with the work and the way it has progressed. You are amazing! I couldn’t have done any of this without your hard work and dedication. Take the rest of the day. Start your weekends early, and then come back Monday ready to start putting the finishing touches in place.”

When Brianna walked back into the house, Wake was two steps behind her all the way.

“Bree, wait up,” he called out just after she’d opened the door, not wanting it to close in his face if he could help it.

He took the door from her hand and held tight to it, using it as a barrier between their bodies.

“Do we have anything to review tonight?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“No, why don’t you go get a drink with everybody, if you like,” she plainly spoke, genuine smile on her face.

“I don’t mind…as long as you…make it home safely.”

Wake nodded.

“Aye, and we do have a…façade to retain…boss.”

Bree smirked and raised one eyebrow.

“Precisely,” Brianna replied.

~~~~~

Brianna released a deep sigh as she put a freshly heated cup of coffee on the kitchen table. Her
laptop sat closed just within reach of where she settled. It had already been over a week since the tower had been completed, but she had yet to share that news with Jamie, and knew that if there was too much lag time between the completion and her informing him, that he would have questions.

After Wake had left for a bit of time at the pub, Bree had taken a number of photos to show what a beautiful job Wake had done in the restoration of Broch Tuarach. She just wanted to do a little doctoring to several of the pictures to point out places she helped with the construction, and to note the final stone that Wake let her place. She uploaded the files to her laptop, and began the manipulation of the images.

It took far longer than she thought it would because each time a new picture opened, she remembered where she was and where Wake was touching her during their intimate interaction in the tower. She could feel his touch if she thought about it too long. Brianna closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths, but couldn’t stop thinking about Wake, and the smile just overtook her face, as did a burning blush. She’d never look at the tower quite the same way again.

Bree finally got the pictures done and sent to her father, and then quickly turned off her computer and phone, not wanting immediate feedback, afraid she might blurt out what she and Wake had done in Jamie’s beloved tower, wanting to keep this glorious new part of her life her secret for now.

~~~~~

Together again after Wake’s brief time at the pub with the men who had been given an early weekend, Wake and Brianna gravitated toward each other and eased into each other’s arms. Bree dropped her head to his shoulder.

“I’ve needed this all day,” she said with a sigh.

“I know, lass. Me too…The whole time I was at the pub I wanted to be here wi’ you. Doona let me go next time, aye? Let the men talk if they will…Should we make the supper first tonight?...Are ye hungry?”

“Ravenous…but I don’t mean food.”

Bree kissed Wake hungrily, her hands holding his head at first, locking eyes between each lip lock. Kiss after kiss was plied to his lips, and Wake responded to her wants.

~~~~~
As they lay contented, Brianna released the slightest sigh and nestled against Wake’s side, her arm like a diagonal sash across his chest. Wake’s hand clamped around her wrist.

“What is it?” he inquired, becoming attuned to Bree’s sighs and moans.

“It’s a lot to take in,” Bree confessed.

Brianna felt more than heard Wake’s chortle, and shifted her eyes up and the corners of her mouth down.

“That’s not what I meant,” she chided poking him in the chest with her left index finger.

The sparkle in his eyes continued, as he surrounded her hand with his, only the extended finger still free.

“Aye…I know lass,” he murmured lovingly, kissing the back of her hand, “I know what you mean, though. I’ve been a bit overwhelmed by it all, too.”

Wake worked their hands around, massaging Bree’s fingers until they straightened out and interlaced with his.

“You’ve forever changed me,” Wake burred, “Taing do Dhia.”

“You must be serious – to speak the Gaidhlig. You almost never do.”

“Unless it’s something from my heart, then it feels it should be the only words I use.”

“Aww,” Bree sighed, leaning in and kissing Wake, truly touched by his sentiment.

They lingered on the edge of sleep for a few minutes when Wake’s stomach started a low, long grumble, protesting the fact that they had foregone eating in order to enjoy one another, and had all
but forgotten about food until this moment. Brianna smiled as she heard the sound, giggling softly, suddenly amazed as her own stomach joined the chorus. Wake kissed her stomach and looked up to speak.

“Perhaps we should have a late snack – something to tide us over ‘til morning,” Wake suggested.

“Maybe we should,” Bree agreed, finding it very hard to look at Wake hovering over her in the bed without drawing him back down on top of her. The smile grew on his face as he saw Bree looking him over so hungrily.

He gave her a kiss, and another flurry of kisses passed between them before the repeated growling of their stomachs finally got them out of bed. They kept the lights low in the kitchen as they pulled together the leftovers in the fridge, not really wanting to become fully awake, and wanting to make it back to bed as quickly as possible.

~~~~~
I've been trying to post this chapter since the 13th, but I am pretty much a prisoner in my own home right now (truck died, mom still recovering, and me in torturous hell after finding painfully that I can no longer eat cashews) and the dial-up is being pissy, maybe because of wet phone lines, as it's been raining each time I tried. This is the chapter I promised Orri - all Jamie, Claire, and Alex. It's a bit short, but represents most of the "new" writing I've done these last few months with all the "real-life" intrusions. Ideas are starting to spring up, I'm accumulating notes and scribbling quick bits, so hopefully the well-spring of creativity is refilling. Finger's crossed this posts this time - sorry if the formatting is wrong.

Keep Looking Up

Jamie happily reviewed all the pictures Brianna sent him of the tower, smiling as he saw the arrows and circles added to the pictures to show what she had had an actual hand in constructing. He was bouncing Alex on his knee, talking to him about his big sister, and how proud he was of her.

“Should we gi’ her a call?” he asked the boy.

Alex clapped his hands together and smiled up at Jamie. He took it as a sign, and was soon listening to Bree’s voicemail prompt to leave a message. Jamie sighed.

“Seems your big sister is off to other projects already. She’s a busy lass, you know. I just hope she’s taking time to enjoy herself and not always working.”

Claire came up behind Jamie at the drawing table in the foyer and smiled over his shoulder as she looked down at Alex.

“Have you heard from Bree?” she asked, having heard Jamie invoke her name.

“New pictures – the tower is done.”

“Oh, wonderful. Won’t be long now until she’s got the house done. Um, Jamie, I’d really like to go see the house and Brianna. It’s been too long without her. I know I used up most of my accrued vacation days after Alex came, but I think I can work a couple of weeks of vacation time. All my years of loyalty should be worth something, and even if I don’t have enough days banked, I have a lot of friends who would cover for me.”

“Bree has tentatively invited us to see the completed house,” Jamie said as he beamed, “And it would be a treat to see her.”

“It would.” Claire agreed as she smiled, then leaned into Alex’s face saying, “Ma ma ma – Mama –Mam,” Claire reinforced as she pointed to herself. She looked up to Jamie’s eyes and blushed.

“If you can teach him to say ‘wah’, I can get him to call me ‘mam’. So far he’s vocalized a lot, but it hasn’t actually been words much of the time.”

“Aye, he does know ‘no’ however, he’s been toying with ‘ba’ for bottle, but if ye keep pointing to yer chest he’s gonna think ‘mam’ is a breast.”

Claire sighed slightly, shaking her head and smiling at Jamie’s humor.

“I need my whole family together in one room, even if it is only for a week or two.”

“As soon as Bree says Lallybroch is ready, we’ll go to her,” Jamie promised.

With a tight schedule to maintain during the week, it was nice to have leisure time on the
weekends. After lunch, Jamie and I took Alex down to the media room. Jamie popped the DVD for The Princess Bride into the player.

“I promised the lass Alex would know this film, and it felt fitting today, as we’re thinking of her so much…Do ye think…is Bree taking time for herself? Or is she working too hard? I want her to have a full life, and a job alone…”

“Bree has always found her outlets,” I assured Jamie. “Sports, the arts – she kept her fingers in a lot of pies, always had a wide spectrum of acquaintances, though few close friends. I’m sure if anything were amiss Fiona would find out and tell us – her son is Bree’s construction foreman, or whatever his title is. We’d know.”

“Aye, I guess.”

We were happily watching the movie yet again, me nestling against Jamie’s shoulder with Alex sitting between us, both of us thinking about Brianna. I don’t know whether it was something on the screen, (the ROUS was making its appearance) or just the sudden want to wander, but Alex began inching his way to the edge of the couch. I pulled him back, and he glared at me. I almost laughed – it was the same glare I’d seen from Bree a thousand times. But it seemed Alex was not content in just sitting there, and this time his escape was much quicker. He whipped his feet and humped forward, getting just over the edge of the cushions before either I or Jamie could stop him. I got just enough of a hand on him to keep him from over-balancing and hitting his head on the coffee table. He sat as he landed on the floor, and I switched on the couch to reach over the side. In the few seconds it took me to regain a visual lock on him, Alex had grasped the edge of the coffee table and had pulled himself into the standing position.

“He’s standing,” I told Jamie, who had not moved until now.

“Aye, he is,” Jamie burred as he cast his eyes upon the situation.

It only lasted a bit longer before he was back on his bum, but it meant a whole new phase was being entered. It was time to toddler-proof the house.

He scooched around to face us, with a look toward standing again, this time his hands reaching for the couch. I reached down for him and he extended his arms up to me.

“Up?” I questioned, “You want up?”

I led his assent back up over the edge of the cushions, like I was belaying him on a mountain climb. He did a lot of the climbing himself, but I took most of the weight out of it. He looked so proud as he put his knees on the couch. I pulled him up tight and kissed his forehead.

“What a good boy,” I said to him, sure I would never let him go again as my arms crossed around him.

~~~

I found myself keeping a wary eye on Alex during our entire dinner, afraid he might try to escape yet again. Each weekend I was amazed by how much progress Alex had made in the preceding week. I’m sure Bree made the same leaps of development at this age, but either my memory has dimmed, or it just feels completely different with Jamie here. While these changes didn’t seem to faze Jamie, I could see in his face how he was enjoying my discovery of each and every one. Alex was changing so fast, even with me only working three days a week.

~~~

It was a beautiful Spring morning, too cold to take Alex out onto the patio, but the light streaming in was irresistible. After lunch, Jamie, Alex and I got down on the floor on the play mat. Jamie and I played with Alex’s blocks while our son all but ignored both us and the blocks. His main interest seemed to lie with crawling beyond our reach. Since we were in open space, he had nothing with which to pull himself to standing, so when crawling away had been thwarted a number of times, he actually turned to us as objects to climb. He pulled himself up first using my knee. He stood for a bit, but made no move to take a step. After going down, he crawled to Jamie and did the same with his knee as a support. Jamie reached out to pick him up, but Alex very loudly said “NO!”, dropped down on all fours and scrambled away. Jamie lunged in Alex’s general direction, his long torso blocking Alex’s escape route.

“Ow!” Jamie exclaimed, “Ye may have to use your surgery skills to remove one of these blocks.”
I smiled sheepishly.
“You haven’t parented until you’ve had the ‘Lego’ experience – trodding one is the usual manner of injury, but sitting or landing on any type of block or plaything counts too.”
Jamie shot me a seductive, but deadly look.

I found myself staring at Alex in the early morning light as he slept peacefully in his drawer on the floor by Jamie’s side of the bed. I was draped over Jamie, smiling lazily. I still couldn’t believe this was my life sometimes. I was tired, but content, Jamie having worn me out with appreciation last night after I plucked the thorn of a building block out of his side.
I had gotten over the initial shock of the Loch Ness Monster condoms Fiona had gifted us with, deciding to look into Jamie’s eyes instead of Nessie’s silly smile when we engaged, but I would be glad when such precautions were no longer needed. Until it was medically impossible, though, I was unwilling to put Jamie through the worry that he might get me pregnant again, and I was none too keen to go through it again either, despite the glorious result we got last time.
Jamie’s hand rubbed up and down my spine.
“He still sleeping?” Jaime asked.
“So far,” I replied.
“Have I told you how glad I am to have this time with ye, Sassenach? How good it feels waking up next to ye, knowing you doona have to get up and hurry off?”
“Well, we should linger this morning then, because tomorrow I have to do just that – hurry off to work,” I said with a sigh.

I sat in my office thinking about yet another swim class Jamie and Alex had just shared. There were just two more classes left. I’d had my lunch and was about to begin expressing Alex’s bottle for tomorrow when there was a knock on my door.
“Claire?” Jamie’s voice said in a low burr.
I jumped to my feet and got to the door quickly, my heart in my throat as I saw Jamie standing there with Alex in his arms.
“Is everything alright?” I asked with concern.
“Aye, Alex just willna take the bottle today. I thought maybe a personally delivered meal might be more to his liking for lunch today.”
I smirked and invited the pair of them into the office with a tilt of my head.
Jamie saw the pumping paraphernalia on my desk.
“Ye have not already done it, have ye?” Jamie asked, picking up the pump and holding it out.
“You got here in the nick of time,” I informed my damp Scot.
Jamie always watched intently when I nursed Alex – I sometimes wondered if it was envy, but I never got in Jamie’s way if he wished to partake. Alex was instantly agreeable to feeding. Jamie placed his hand on top of mine as I held Alex to my chest.
“He just wouldnae have the bottle today, I doona know why. We’d been doing fine until today.”
I smiled, holding out the slightest hope that this was Alex telling me we do have a bond like the one he shares with his father. It had only been since breakfast that I’d nursed Alex last, but it was as if a long drought were over. It felt cathartic in a way. Alex was bridging the gap between us in one of the few ways he had to reach out to me. He wasn’t ready to abandon the physical connection of mother and child.
The joy and relief must have been painted all over my face.
“Sassenach, I could bring him for every lunch,” Jamie offered.
“What?” I replied in surprise.
“I can see what it means to you, and to Alex.”
“Coming this far out of your way? It made sense today since you were only in the other parking lot, but…”
“If Alex refuses the bottle, I don’t see as I have any choice.”
“This could be an anomaly – did something happen at the class to upset him by any chance?”
Jamie smiled and shook his head. "And here I thought I was reading you. Aye, I had to hold another of the bairns in the pool today – her mother had a…wardrobe malfunction and it was either help her with her wayward swimsuit or take the child to free her hands.”

“And you made the wiser choice,” I said.

“Aye, but Alex didna take kindly to being one of two bairns in my arms.”

“And so he made his complaint known by refusing the bottle – rather acute reasoning skills,” I said with a smirk.

I switched Alex to the other breast halfway through allowing him to drink his fill. The lunchtime visit was a nice respite from the workday, but I knew it wouldn’t work as an everyday thing.

“Jamie, what if I’d been in surgery, or unavailable for some other reason – for example, tomorrow I have a surgery beginning at 10:30. It will likely last into the afternoon. I’ll already have to change when I express Alex’s bottle and hope for the best. As much as I would love to feed him like this every meal, every day…it’s not practical.”

Jamie nodded, looking subdued.

“I know, Sassenach, but ye usually tell me in the morning if ye have surgery, and I didna remember any such conversation this morning, so I took a chance. And as you said, we were only a parking lot away.”

I smiled as Alex finally pushed away from my breast.

“All done?” I asked him, seeing a contented look in his eyes.

I saw Jamie collecting a blanket out of the diaper bag, draping it over his shoulder as he reached out for Alex.

“I’ll take him,” he said, placing Alex high on his shoulder, his hand swirling around the boy’s back a few times before he started patting to prompt a burp.

“Good boy,” Jamie burred, “Balach math. It seems our good boy needs a new diaper.”

“There are changing stations in every rest room,” I offered.

“Aye, Sassenach, and better in a place it should be than where you eat your lunch,” Jamie said with the jaunty tilt of his head and a gleam in his eyes.

He pulled his mouth into a tight smile, taking up the diaper bag.

“I’ll be right back, luaidh mo cheil,” Jamie pronounced as he turned toward the door.

“I love of my life,” Claire repeated in English, feeling a charge in her heart.

Jamie returned to my office after changing Alex, and I absorbed every minute I could of the feeling of being needed so acutely. We slowly gathered up what Jamie had brought with him, and that included out little water bug, Alex. We got as far as the nurse’s station when I heard a voice say, “Jamie, Alex – is that you?”

I was well obscured behind them, and it wasn’t until I made it around Jamie’s shoulder that I saw who was speaking.

“Aye,” Jamie replied, happy at first, but then I heard him gulp in a breath.

“I don’t think I thanked you enough…” the physical therapist who’d gossiped about Jamie started to say until she saw me standing at Jamie’s side.

“Dr. Fraser,” she breathlessly said, “…is this…”

“My husband and my son, yes,” I replied with a broad smile, taking ahold of Jamie’s arm.

“Claire, this is the woman I told you about, whose daughter I held today in class.”

“I was just thanking him again,” she said to me, “My Ariel – she undid one of my shoulder straps – I was still fully covered, but…”

“No need to explain,” I offered, “Jamie told me what happened.”

“Of course,” she forced out, seeming nervously breathless.

Jamie nodded at her once more and then turned toward me and gave me a kiss.

“Hurry home,” he requested.

“The moment I can,” I answered him.

I caressed Alex’s cheek and smiled at the two of them as Jamie prepared to leave. I watched until
the elevator doors closed.
“Oh my God, Dr. Fraser, I’m so sorry about anything I might have said about your husband – I…
I’m…”
“So that was about Jamie – you were right, I am a lucky woman.”
I smirked and raised my eyebrows, letting her think whatever she wanted about what it meant, and
then I sauntered back to my office, perhaps with a slight exaggeration of the normal swing of my
hips.

Each week it was getting harder to be away from Alex and Jamie for the span of my work. I
thought by now it would be getting easier, and that I might be thinking about going back full time,
but the draw of seeing Alex experience the world, and seeing Jamie see it through his eyes was
strengthening. The want to surround myself with family had taken on a new importance. Perhaps it
was missing Brianna, and the lack of communication with her. For a good many years we were
inseparable – two halves of a whole. Jamie’s concerns had awakened some of my latent fears that
Bree might miss out on much life had to offer to focus on career and business. And without Jamie
around, would she back-track in her inter-personal relationships?
I had to trust that Fiona and Roger would not let her get away with such behavior – inviting her to
movie and music nights as she had told me about – insisting that she have a life other than restoring
Lallybroch, introducing her to new experiences, but still I worried.

“Sassenach?”
I looked toward Jamie’s voice.
“Where were you?”
“Sorry, lost in thought,” I replied.
“Aye, worried about Bree?”
“It’s hard not to be. You got me thinking about her the other night, and now I can’t stop wondering
if she’s making time for fun. I want our daughter to have everything, but if she keeps herself
tethered to her work desk all day…”
Jamie slipped in behind me and wrapped me in his arms.
“When we go to see her, we’ll make sure she knows how to enjoy herself.”

~~~~~
Still battling writers block and internet issues, but trying very hard to get this next chapter out to you. I should reach the 20000 read mark this chapter, and I am continually amazed by the support and interaction I get from my readers. You have invested in my storytelling and make great observations and comments that tell me you really are paying close attention, and that is gratifying. Thank-you. Sorry if the spacing is off again - weird formatting stuff keeps happening.

Roger and Fiona were planning a gathering of family, and a small celebration for the completion of the tower. Neither Wake nor Brianna had actually told them the tower was done, but men in pubs talk, and Roger gets down to his ‘local’ from time to time, and it was bound to be conversation fodder when a project as big as Lallybroch was wrapping up. There was a level of family pride – the true family with Wake and the close-as-family with Brianna – about the work done at Lallybroch, so this was more a command appearance than an invitation.

Brianna was nervous. This was the first time since she and Wake became more than colleagues that she would be seeing his parents – who were godparents to her, after all. She hoped she could keep that emotional mask Jamie could muster, and not suddenly display her mother’s tell-all expression. The relationship was too new, as far as she was concerned, to be answering the questions she knew would arise should his parents and older siblings realized they were now sleeping together, or more importantly, that they were together with very little sleeping involved.

Wake noticed her apprehension.

“You’re not ready for them to know. God, I knew I shoulda talked them out of this. Mam’ll take one look at us – one look at me – and she’ll know I’ve seen ye naked again. And I’m pretty sure Albie has confirmed I’ve not been at my apartment. Should I make up an excuse?”

Brianna smiled at her MacKenzie and took his hand.

“Honestly, it’s not your parents knowin’ so much as your brothers and sisters, and all the nieces and nephews. I mean, I’ve seen how they tease you. I know they mean it to be funny, or to try to nudge you into finding someone…”

“But now that I have…found someone…”

Wake came around her, and placed a knee on the chair between her legs as he wrapped his hands around her shoulders.

“And I have found someone, Brianna. You are THE one for me.”

He bent further and placed a lingering kiss on her lips. Brianna let out a delighted sigh for both his words and the kiss. Her hands crept around his back, a shy, but innuendo laden smirk taking over her face.

“Not showing up won’t keep them all from finding out, and I can hear their tongues wagging already if we show up late.”

“Ye’ve got more bravery than I,” Wake replied.

“But really…I’m kinda terrified. But, if we can’t stand up to the scrutiny of your family…I can only imagine what my dad might do.”

~~~~~

They arrived at the manse together, but showing no outward signs of their mutual affection.

“Come and give us a hug, wren -I, er, mean my ostrich,” Roger greeted Brianna, getting a blushing,
but slightly aggravated expression.

“Please, don’t call me that?” she requested as she pulled back from his embrace.

Wake chuckled as he slipped past her in the doorway, brushing against her slightly, and taking the opportunity to run his hand across the small of her back.

“You won’t break him of calling you by a ‘pet’ name,” Wake announced, just barely stopping himself from kissing her on the temple.

Brianna flashed him a worried look.

“Aye…”, Roger interrupted the moment they were trying to forestall.

“I canna call ye wren now, with you so tall and leggy, and ostrich fits ye, if not the legs, then the eyelashes – they have big, blinky eyes just like you – ostrich,” he directed at Bree, then kissed her right between the eyes.

She tried to keep her slightly angered look, but couldn’t help breaking into a smile as Roger looked at her with such a twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh, you can call me ostrich – but only you,” she said, making sure Wake was listening. Roger turned to his son with a triumphant grin.

“Doona worra Da, I can come up with my own names for her.”

~~~~~

Had it been only Fiona and Roger, Bree would have been comfortable, but she was never at ease when either of Wake’s sisters were around. Brianna tried to act normal, but being the only non-MacKenzie at the table made her the obvious fish out of water, and the concern on Wake’s face was growing more obvious by the minute.

“So, baby brother,” Wake’s sister Janet began, “I hear you’ve practically moved in at Lallybroch.”

“Has he now?” Fiona reacted.

Brianna’s shoulders stiffened and she choked for a moment on her latest forkful, Fiona patting her on the back until she put up her hand to signal ‘enough’, but leaving Brianna’s face quite red.

Under the table, Wake reached out and caressed Bree’s knee while she hid her expression behind the glass from which she was slowly drinking.

“So is my brother being a good lodger?” Jem asked.

It was meant to be a stab at Wake and his known past behavior, but Brianna gulped and grabbed Wake’s hand above the table, telling all those assembled without a single word that they had unknowingly hit the nail on the head.

“Oh,” Janet hummed, smirk lifting her features.

“Really?” Jem seconded.

“Um-hmm,” Janet answered without even having to part her lips.

Bree cast a worried look at Wake, feeling their secret unspooling around the table.

“Oh, did I not say it months ago, that stone was not the only thing he’d be laying on this job!” Janet quipped, aiming her comment at Jem, nearly ignoring both Wake and Brianna.

Roger half smiled, but his eyes looked sad, knowing how hard it had to be for Wake and Brianna to sit there while their lives became conversation fodder. Wake was becoming increasingly protective of Bree, leaning in to whisper in her ear.

“I’m sorry. It’s all meant for me, but you’re getting caught in the crossfire.”

She nodded, but she was worried, not so much about those in the room, but about whom they might tell.

Fiona leaned into Bree’s other ear.

“You won’t have told your mam, then, would ye?” Bree shook her head, choking up and fighting off tears.

“Doona worry – it is your news to tell, not mine, or theirs,” she informed her, comforting hand rubbing side to side on Brianna’s back, “But I’ve known where this was headed near on two years now.”

Bree had ceased to hear the actual words of Wake’s brother and sister, only seeing their expressions as they one-upped each other with clever turns of phrase and innuendo at Wake’s and
her expense, but it was starting to work into her mind that she and Wake must have been a topic of conversation among the rest of the family for quite some time. A knock on the door took Roger from the table, much to his relief. “Abigail!” he greeted in surprise. “Canna stay long, but I thought I could make a flying stop,” the second youngest MacKenzie expressed as she gave her father a quick hug and made her way into the kitchen. “Hey, Abs,” Janet caught her little sister’s attention with, “Guess what Wake’s been doin’…or should I say who?” Roger took the opportunity to slip away and be alone with his thoughts. There were times when he didn’t like the hyena pack of gossips his children were capable of being, but knowing that genetic component was so strong in Fiona’s family tree as to be unavoidable. He also knew that to try to stop the behavior would only serve to rile up the pack and make their interest twice as long.

~~~~~

Brianna had heard enough of the teasing and ribald comments aimed at her and Wake, and slipped away to a room she thought was empty. She closed the door and stood with her forehead against it for several moments, just breathing. “Doona worra lass, it’s outta love,” came from a dark corner, Brianna jumping as she turned. “Roger – I thought I had the room to myself.” “Not quite…come over and give us a hug, lass,” Roger invited, extending his arms in invitation. “Don’t you have a comment…or a joke about me and Wake?” she uneasily asked, brows furrowed, and arms crossed defiantly across her chest. “I wouldna tease ye so, Ostrich – but I will say I find myself rather jealous of my son just now.” Roger smiled invitingly, dropping her defenses and easing her apprehension. Brianna walked over to the recliner by the fireplace and leaned down to do as Roger had requested. She sighed and pulled back, settling on the arm of the chair with Roger’s arm around her back, and his hand on her hip. Bree leaned her head comfortably on his shoulder. “Shall I tell you a secret?” Roger inquired. “A secret?” she replied. “Aye, something I’ve never told another living soul – and that Fiona shouldna know.” Brianna’s visage showed worry and concern. “I thought…good relationships…didn’t have secrets,” she stated, lifting her head and looking to him for answers. “For the most part, that’s true, but this is different…this is something that can never be, just the notion would wound Fee deeply, but…it is something I should like you to know.” “You’re scaring me a little,” Bree confessed. “Och, I doona mean to upset ye – quite the contrary.” Brianna nodded at him, freeing Roger to unburden himself. “I once did the math. After Claire came back, had she come to the year she expected, you’d have been of an age close to mine – nearly the same difference as you and Wake. I’ve always felt a connection to you, and believe fully, that had she come to 1948, and the timeline played out differently, it is you who I would have wed – or at least I surely would have made a play for you,” he exhaled, thinking of what would never be. “And seeing you, all grown and…so beautiful – I would have done anything to woo you. But, fate bringing you to the year it did, I could not be more proud to see that my son is smart enough to see how special you are. Even when he tries to hide it, Wake comes alive in your presence. So doona let the other’s comments bother ye. Wake needs you in his life, so I’ll make no jokes or comments, and ask only the one question – do you love him?” Bree’s eyes teared up. “With all that I am.” “Good – now take him back to Lallybroch before he regrets comin’ here tonight.” ~~~~~

“Here,” Fiona whispered, shoving something into Wake’s hands, “You’ll need this soon.”
Wake opened his hand, finding his mother had put a small box into his grasp – very clearly a box that would contain a ring. The hinge creaked as he pressured the lid back.

“I’ve never seen anything like it – is that?”

“Green jade inlaid in silver – hand made, and I think you’ll find it will fit her finger perfectly. – All your siblings needed a smaller size, so I never offered them this – I didna want it being altered – might let the magic out by mistake. But Brianna Fraser has the finger this ring was meant to grace.”

~~~

Wake had just closed the ring box when Jem came back into the now almost empty kitchen.

“So, you and Brianna Fraser?” Jem probed, “Finally.”

Wake sat there shaking his head. And cast an evil eye in his brother’s direction.

“You know, I didn’t want to come here tonight… I didn’t want to put her through a scene like that – but she insisted, said it would do no good to hide out. And how was her bravery rewarded? You once nearly threatened to feed me my own teeth if I’d done anything to hurt her – a thought that resurfaced the first time she kissed me. I spurned her, almost lost her because I was afraid of hurting her.”

Wake stood.

“If you and Janet and Abby screwed this up for me, I will never forgive any of you.”

Jem reached his right hand out and placed it over Wake’s heart.

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be,” he curtly tossed back, twisting away from Jem’s hand.

“This is different,” Jem intuited, “You confided your interest, but I still wasna sure you were serious. But I see it now. She…”

“She’s the one. I havna thought of any other woman since Bree fell into my life. The last eighteen months have been the most enlightening, frustrating… weird courtship – after months of flirting long-distance, and then having to get to know each other all over again once she was here, two steps forward and three steps back, over and over, mistakes and missteps – I was starting to feel like a yo-yo in zero gravity!” Wake said in exasperation.

“We finally - finally – got over ourselves and let our feelings be known - If you’ve done anything to give her second thoughts - ”

“Brianna Fraser knows her own mind. She’d never have taken things so far on a whim. Och, has she got you wrapped up,” Jem breathed out with a growing smile as he looked at his brother.

“I always knew it would take an extraordinary woman, and the lass is that. Go find her.”

Wake smiled and raised one eyebrow. He patted Jem on the back of the shoulder as he passed, following in the direction in which Brianna had disappeared.

~~~

Taking Roger’s advice, Brianna left the den in search of Wake. They entered the study from opposite sides, each seeing the other across the room. Wake took a deep breath, taken with just the sight of her. Bree straightened up tall and strode confidently and swiftly across the room. Before Wake could say a thing, Bree laced her fingers behind his neck and kissed him passionately. The room filled with everyone who was still there. They all watched as Brianna laid claim publicly to the youngest child of Roger and Fiona MacKenzie in front of her in-laws to be.

“Take me home,” Bree stated.

Wake lifted her ever so slightly off her feet and headed for the door to the applause of brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews.

Wake put her back on her feet just inside the door.

“I love you,” he whispered, then kissed her softly.

“And don’t you forget it,” Bree ordered.

Wake slowly drew in a long breath as the smile overtook his face.

“Never.”

~~~

After a drive back to Lallybroch that seemed to take an eternity, Wake and Brianna strode with all
haste into the house. For a moment, they eyed each other and circled closer and closer, reaching each other near the stairs. His hands slid around her hips as her arms reached for his shoulders and snaked around Wake’s neck.

They melted against each other, each sighing as a gentle kiss concluded. Bree began stepping up the stairs backward, using the height advantage to help strip the shirt off over Wake’s head, and standing proudly as she shucked her sweater in the same fashion.

Bree took one more step up and back, drawing Wake along with a glint in her eyes and body language that was screaming louder than Bree herself could. Wake charged the gap between them, lifting Brianna from her feet, stopping on the first landing to kiss Bree on her lips and neck and whatever he could reach by pulling on the t-shirt she still wore.

Breath puffing in excitement, Wake only stopped kissing Bree when her reaching for the hem of his t-shirt took her out of reach of his exploring lips. He quickly reciprocated, both t-shirts sailing away. Both now stripped to the waist, Bree’s bra seemingly leaving of its own accord, Wake lowered her to the stairs and knelt on the first step of the second run.

He unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans and sawed them back and forth until the waistband slipped over her hips, allowing him to strip them off all but Brianna’s left foot.

“Ow, Wake, the stairs are digging into me,” Brianna complained. “Sorry,” he tossed back, gathering her up and wrapping her legs around his waist as he got to his feet. The jeans were still caught on Bree’s foot, and they whipped around, snapping at Wake’s heels, encouraging him onward and upward.

It wasn’t easy, but he got her to the third floor bedroom where they continued to denude each other. Bree finally stepped the stuck pants leg off her foot.

“Oh, my Goddess, don’t let it ever stop, wanting you like this. You’re mine,” Wake insisted, his mouth soon covered in Brianna’s answer as she backed him to the bed and pushed him to the mattress.

“Au contraire, mon ami – you’re mine,” Brianna corrected him, dominating his body.

Wake kissed her – a long linger of his lips on hers. He caressed her neck and shoulders, becoming breathless the longer he thought about where he was and who he was pressed beneath.

“My Goddess,” he exhaled.

~~~~~

Wake sat in the window well, looking out on the tower in the moonlight. He couldn’t help but see it as a phallic symbol outlined on the hillside as he thought about how he and Bree had christened the structure. He looked over at Brianna in the bed and let out a deep breath of contentment.

“How did I get so lucky?” he whispered into the ether, and then glanced down at the open ring box sitting next to him on the window well.

He picked it up and cradled it in his hand.

“But…you are not ready for this, yet. I can wait.”

“Wake?” Bree croaked out in a broken tone.

Wake dropped his feet down to the floor and quietly closed the ring box.

“Right here, lass,” he whispered as he walked to the bed and hovered over her, “right here.”

“Oh…good…you are here.”

He thought about the boxed ring in his hand again.

“Aye, forever.”

~~~~~
Sounding Board

Chapter Notes

I would have been back to post sooner, but I have a pre-post ritual of reading the new chapter out loud to my mom as a final check for how it sounds, if there are any problems, etc., but I've had this upper respiratory lingering month long crud that has rendered me voiceless for the most part until this past week. (Try reading with a persistent cough and volume that comes and goes!) Finally got it read out yesterday. I started to worry last week as I noticed my bookmarks falling off - I don't want to lose any of you!

Sounding Board

Claire found herself daydreaming about Jamie and Alex in the pool yet again. Those nagging thoughts from the back of her mind were coming to the forefront with increasing frequency – she was missing out. It was difficult for her to even admit to herself that she was thinking what it would be like to be a full-time stay-at-home mom. Bree had turned out fine with a working mom, and Claire had always thought she was a good role model in that way, but maybe Alex was different. She needed an unbiased opinion – or as close as she could get. Claire picked up her office phone.

“Janet, do you have a few minutes?...Coffee would be great. I’ll meet you in the café.”

Janet was waiting for Claire with two coffees in hand, and they slipped out the door into the courtyard. It was a bit chilly, but the coffee did its job in warming them from the inside.

“What’s up, Claire?”

Claire inhaled deeply and smiled as she exhaled.

“I need an opinion – as unbiased as possible. Am I making a mistake in not staying home to raise Alex? I’m…jealous…of Jamie…”

“I thought I noticed a far-away look on your face in a couple of meetings. It’s normal to think about what you’re missing, or what you think you’re missing. I guess you need to ask yourself those tough questions. Is work still fulfilling – or would staying home be more fulfilling than the job you’re doing? Is your uncertainty causing turmoil in your marriage? Are you ready to give up the career you’ve spent so many years cultivating? I went through the same thing with my last child, but like you, my husband took all the pressure off, and let it be my choice. You have to make the decision you can live with without resenting the path not taken.”

Claire nodded.

“As always, you reflect the questions I need to ask before I even know what they are…while I have you here…would you be willing to cover for me for a week or so, so Jamie, Alex and I can go see Bree and the completed house in Scotland?”

“Bree’s almost done with the house? That was fast.”

“Not really…it’s been a year and a half, but she sent pictures of the completed tower…and I really
need to see her, look into her eyes and give her a hug.”

“There is no substitute for a hug, is there? I’d be glad to stand in for you,” Janet confirmed with a nod, “Ooh, I’m getting cold out here,” she trilled, rubbing her free hand up and down her arm.

Claire put her arm around Janet’s back.

“Thank-you. Now I just have to get everyone else on board or I may make a rash decision to get my week or two with Brianna.”

~~~~~

A beaming Brianna emerged from the house. She nodded toward Wake, smiled at the lead carpenter who was standing with him, and headed toward a truck that had just stopped backing up in the yard.

“Miss Fraser seems to be in very high spirits this morning. Don’t think I’ve seen her smile so the whole of the time she’s been here,” he commented to Wake as Brianna was overseeing a delivery of furniture.

“Och, well, I’m sure you’ve seen it before – the project’s almost over – she can see the end of it now. She’s been living in the middle of a construction zone for over a year now.”

“Aye, and she’s handled it well, for the most part – she’s no shrinking violet, to be sure – she just had that wee rough patch just before last Christmas. Probably got homesick with her family so far away.”

Wake felt a tingle walk up his spine, knowing he had been the cause of her “rough patch”.

“Aye,” Wake exhaled, “holidays can…put things in focus,” he thought recalling how he’d spent the holidays.

“I heard she flew home at the last minute for Christmas.”

“Ye heard wrong – she met up with an old friend.”

“Och, really?”

“She regaled my Mam and Da with the pictures…Hey, so, looks like you’ve only got a week or two you should need to finish things up. The landscapers only a day or so more than that – been a pleasure working with you and your crew again,” Wake said as he offered his hand.

“Sure, anytime,” he replied, taking Wake’s hand for a hearty shake.

~~~~~

“I’m really looking forward to seeing Bree…and the house of course,” Claire spoke into the darkness. A warm kiss touched her cheek.

“Aye, Sassenach,” was whispered in reply.

“Janet agreed to cover for me, and I have tentative agreements with four other doctors – all parents who seem to understand my need to see Bree in person – oh, we need to get a passport for Alex, and even if we pay the extra to expedite it, it takes time to process.”

Jamie smiled as he heard the excitement in Claire’s voice.
“I’ll look into it in the morning,” he once more whispered, then touched his lips ever so lightly on her cheek as he tightened his arms around her.

~~~~~

“Can we go over the punch list before you leave tonight?” Brianna asked after seeing Wake flash her a look after reluctantly accepting his second invitation to the pub in a week.

“It won’t take too long, I promise,” she assured with a smile.

Wake gave an apologetic shrug to the other men.

“Sure. Whatever you need,” he agreed, then smirked with one side of his mouth for a split second.

“Duty calls, lads. I’ll try to get there later.”

“It’s as if you’ve given up drinkin’, Wake. I’ve barely seen you with a dram in weeks now.”

“You know how it goes – the final push before the project ends,” Wake replied, realizing just how laden with innuendo that could sound to someone thinking along those lines.

“Well, goodnight Miss Fraser,” Bree’s lead carpenter, Mr. MacDougal said.

“Aye, goodnight,” several others said, giving a final wave over their shoulders as they headed to their cars.

Bree smiled at Wake and began ambling toward the study.

She was leafing through sheets of paper on a clipboard when he caught up to her.

“Were you serious, then? You really want to go over the punch list?” he incredulously asked, his mouth contorted in disbelief.

She flicked her eyebrows up for a second and went back to looking at the papers before her.

“We might as well. Like you said…the final push.”

“OK…whatever works for you.”

A hint of a smile got pushed back off Brianna’s face.

Wake sat on the stool next to the drawing table and leaned one elbow on the tilted surface.

“So, we’re pretty much down to finishes and final cosmetic touches – except for the third floor, but that’s to be expected since we won’t be finishing that space until my dad tells me what he wants done with it.”

“I thought I saw some drawings for the third floor,” Wake inflected.

“That was just an idea,” Bree shook her head and flailed one hand, clearly embarrassed he’d seen her sketch of the third floor master suite she’d imagined them sharing.

She put the clipboard down on the drawing table and stood with her back to Wake as she turned the pages again.

“Not too much left, then,” Wake toned.
Bree nodded, her back still to Wake.

“You could still go to the pub, if you’d rather…” Bree tonally droned.

“I didna want to go to the pub in the first place,” Wake said, standing. “I thought you understood the look I gave you, and that’s why…”

He reached for her hips and abruptly turned her as he quickly stepped right up to Bree. A quick look in her eyes told him all he needed to know. Wake swooped in to kiss her. Bree sighed and pulled Wake in for another kiss.

“Thank God,” he said between kisses, “I thought…you were mad at me…couldn’t…think why.”

“All I can do…to keep my hands off…in front of them,” Bree answered through the next set of kisses.

They sank into each other’s arms.

“Christ, Brianna, I am…SO in love with you,” Wake hissed.

“Show me,” Bree whispered back as a smile touched her lips and the blush ran up her face. She felt a flip in the pit of her stomach.

He lifted her backside up onto the surface of the drawing table and as he leaned her up the incline, she drew her feet up, lacing them around Wake’s hips. He just missed catching the clipboard with his hand. His mouth was still pursed with his last word still on his lips as he moved in to kiss Bree again. They sought to slake their desires, but only stoked the fires that burned within each of them.

When the blueprints made a crinkling noise beneath them, Bree broke a kiss and turned her head aside.

“I’ll have to iron out the plans if we go on like this,” Brianna exclaimed.

“It’d be worth it,” Wake seriously replied, slowly breaking into a smile and laughing.

“Very cute,” Bree said, smirking back at his impish expression, and pressing her thumb on the middle of his lower lip
She took his head into her hands.

“You are very cute…I think we need to go upstairs.”

She studied his eyes.

“Aye…if I can still walk.”

~~~~~

“The alarm doesna go off for another hour,” Wake mumbled, catching Bree’s eyes open.

“I know. I’m just…savoring this,” she softly offered, rubbing her hands over Wake’s. “Waking up to you – it was strange at first, but now it seems strange if you aren’t here.”

Wake smiled broadly as a warm feeling tingled through his chest, and he found himself compelled to place a light kiss behind her ear.

“Good, because I’m not goin’ anywhere.”
“So,” Wake said after finishing his last sip of coffee, “What do you need me to do?” he asked leaning in across the table with a solicitous smile. “I’ve got two free hands today.”

“Well, in that case, I’ve got a whole suite of bedroom furniture to assemble and arrange for the Laird’s room – wanna help me make a bed?”

The smirk grew on Wake’s face, and Bree knew a smart remark was in the forming stages in Wake’s brain.

“I’d rather help ye un-make a bed…but,” he leaned in over his elbows on the table.

Bree leaned in from her side of the table smirking back, laughing lightly.

“I love that smile,” She informed Wake, moving in closer to kiss him.

Wake’s arms began enveloping Bree like a clinging vine, pulling her around the table until she was in his lap. Bree sighed as he held her tight, a light blush still overtaking her face over his attentions.

“Perhaps I should rethink my offer,” Bree purred in his ear, “Or everyone will know about us.”

“Are you sure everyone doesn’t already know about us?”

“What? Has somebody said something to you? Your Mom made it sound like…it would…stay in the family…”

“No, no, no one’s said a thing to me,” Wake said soothingly, “Not specifically. Callum did mention you looked happier than usual, but there was no hint of innuendo. He was just glad to see a smile on yer face.”

Wake pulled Bree closer and kissed her ear and then nuzzled the side of her head. Bree closed her eyes and let herself melt against his chest and shoulder.

“I know you don’t understand why I’m not ready for the world to know about us. I’d explain it to you if I could, but I don’t think I fully understand why myself. I guess part of it is not wanting people to look at me differently.”

“Why would they look at you differently?”

“Because…I feel so different.”

Wake nuzzled at Bree’s neck once again.

“Just a couple of weeks, and you wilna have to worry. The workers will have gone, and we’ll have the place to ourselves.”

Wake felt a chill work through Brianna’s body.

“But then what?” Bree whispered, barely audibly, as she stared out over his shoulder.

Wake took in a breath to speak when they both heard the rumble of trucks arriving in the yard. Bree got to her feet quickly and crossed to the counter, pouring herself a couple more sips of coffee and gathering herself.

After a deep breath or two, Bree turned to face Wake.
“Pick a couple of guys who work well together and who like jigsaw puzzles. The bed will take more than the two of us to assemble. I’ll be upstairs sorting out the pieces.”

Wake nodded.

“Aye.”

Wake followed Bree with his eyes as she headed back upstairs, hoping she would turn and explain her doubt-filled question of ‘then what?’ The enigma that is Brianna Fraser was confounding him yet again.

~~~~~

Bree had stood the pieces for the bed to the four walls according to where they went, hoping it would facilitate the assembly. She’d had Jamie to help her assemble the bed in the Leoch room, and as he’d designed and built the thing, he knew exactly where everything went.

Bree looked at all the pieces, pretty proud that she’d found a local firm to construct a bed similar to the one her father made. She wanted Jamie to feel at home in the Laird’s room.

“Bree?” Wake called as he approached the room, “I got those hands you needed,” he continued as he came to the door.

Wake was followed into the room by the head carpenter, Callum, and his apprentice Craig.

“Mr. MacDougal,” Bree said in surprise.

“Aye, this seemed to be the most useful place I could lend a hand today. I’m on call should trouble crop up, but I wished to keep my hands busy, and this will be a useful lesson for Craig,” he said, tilting his head at his apprentice.

Bree smiled broadly and nodded.

“Good enough, just as long as we don’t get anything wrong. I’d hate to have the bed fall apart while my parents are in it.”

Callum raised a brow.

“I’m redoing Lallybroch for my parents – I thought everyone knew.”

“I’m sure we knew once, but as you’re the one we’re working for…”

Bree nodded in understanding.

“Shall we get to work, then?” Bree asked.

“Have ye ever assembled such a thing before, lass?” Callum inquired.

“Just once – my dad and I built a bed as a present for my mom. Well, actually, my dad did most of it. I just did what he said to do.”

“Och, too must modesty doesna suit ye, lass,” Callum said as he wagged a finger.

Wake found himself smirking until Bree gave him a dirty look, and even then, he couldn’t completely wipe the look off his face.
With a maximum of effort and a minimum of swear words, the assembly of the bed went well. The three men provided much of the muscle while Bree herself provided the necessary finesse. Wielding a rubber mallet, Bree sent home the pegs and helped get the tight tenons in place. The lower parts of the bed were completed by the time they took their lunch break, and the upper frame and curtain stringers were in place before the day came to its close.

“Well, lass, looks as though we’ve put a pretty good dent in the job today. Would ye like us to come back tomorrow and help ye finish it up?” Mr. MacDougal inquired.

“It’s the weekend, I wouldn’t want to interrupt your plans. This was the hard part. I’ll do what I can, and if there’s something I can’t do, Monday will be soon enough. I think my dad will really like this,” Bree added caressing one of the posts, “I hope the one for the north room came out as nice.”

“Wake?” MacDougal said presenting his hand, “A pleasure as always. Now doona leave this lass in the lurch – she’ll need a hand yet, so lend her one.”

“My mam would have my hide should I be less than gentlemanly,” Wake said with a growing grin.

They continued to shake hands and Wake gave the man a slap on the back as well. Bree took it upon herself to thank Craig, offering her hand and ‘thanks’. His eyes lit up and he held onto her hand just a bit too long for Bree’s comfort, and Wake could see the change in her expression. Wake wasn’t sure who he was saving, Bree from an unwanted advance in the making, or Craig from making a fool of himself, but he stepped in.

“So, Craig,” Wake said to interrupt the eruption he sensed coming from Brianna, “How long have you been Callum’s apprentice now?”

“Two years, give or take.”

“Ach, you’re a newbie,” Wake declared, wrapping an arm around Craig’s shoulders, “I doona know how long it is for carpentry normally, but that’s a drop in the bucket were you doing stonework.”

He escorted Craig from the room, exerting a bit of force to keep him moving forward. Mr. MacDougal had a bit of a hang-dog look as he shook his head.

“Try to excuse the lad. His lass dropped him a fortnight ago, and ever since he’s been over-attentive to anyone with a heartbeat who showed him a bit of interest.”

Bree nodded.

“I’ll try,” Bree said with a polite smile to Callum, “but under the circumstances, I don’t think I’ll be having the two of you do the other bedroom, if you don’t mind.”

“Point taken, lass. Perhaps keep that job in…trusted hands. I’m sure Wake and you could handle it, minus the unwanted advance.”

“My dad and I did put one together with just the two of us, but…my dad can do the impossible, so I thought I’d need more help.”

Mr. MacDougal beamed proudly.
“Your Da must be somethin’, ‘cause there’s very little I imagine you couldna do yourself.”

Bree blushed and shifted her gaze to her feet.

“I appreciate – “

“There ye go again, that false modesty.”

Bree shifted a glare up at Callum and he warmly smiled back.

“I really couldn’t have done this without you and all your men. I’m…planning on having a party of sorts to thank everyone who worked on the project. I’m not sure about timing yet, and I’d like it to be when my parents can be here too. But they’ve got their hands full right now with my baby brother and my mom’s job, so…”

“Och, well, Wake knows how to find me. And word will spread, don’t you worry.”

“I’m sure it will. Thank-you. I hate to admit it even now, I was scared stiff the first few weeks here. I was afraid no one would take my direction, but you never made me feel like I was over my head, and you never looked past me to get Wake’s approval once I was here. I appreciate that more than you’ll ever know.”

“Aw, lass, it was clear to me from the day you set foot here, you were in charge.”

Callum MacDougal headed out leaving Brianna in the Laird’s room. Bree heard Wake and Mr. MacDougal exchange farewells again in the hall, and then Wake curled around the door to the Laird’s room.

“There you are – what next?” Wake asked with a broad grin.

“Help me with the mattress,” Bree requested.

Together they walked the mattress to the base of the bed and slipped it in place with a thump. Happy with how it settled into place, Bree turned and sat on the foot of the bed, pointing her feet out straight ahead of her, and placing her hands far out from her hips on the mattress.

“Shall we…break in the bed?” Wake said with a lascivious smirk.

“Are you kidding? My dad would know – it would be like the three bears – ‘someone’s been not sleeping in my bed’ – nope.”

“Your Da’s got quite a varied set of skills, aye?”

“You have no idea – every time I think I’ve found something he doesn’t know…he does.”

“Well then…” Wake paused, looking around the room, not sure what to say next.

“Hungry?” Bree asked.

“I could eat.”

Wake reached his hand out until Bree took it, and with a light tug, he pulled her to her feet. She suddenly picked up speed, looked over her shoulder and challenged him without a word. They dashed down the stairs, Bree staying close to the railing as she took the curve into the kitchen. Wake went straight down the run, intending to vault over the railing, hoping to make up time by making it to the floor while Bree had a number of stairs to go, but as he came to the point he’d have
to launch himself from, he thought better of it, imagining a broken ankle, or worse. He was still carrying a lot of speed despite aggressive deceleration as he reach the railing. He grabbed the top rail, but couldn’t stop his forward motion, flipping over the top, making a very awkward landing as he held onto the railings, his arms above his head as he slithered to the floor. When he didn’t appear in the kitchen, Bree came around the corner looking for him.

“Ow,” Wake moaned.

“What did you do?” Bree asked, approaching him.

“This is what indecision looks like,” he said with a smirk.

Bree came a knelt next to him on the floor.

“Do I need to take you for medical treatment?”

“Oh, no, just…be a little gentle with me – if ye can.”

Bree helped him to his feet while she shook her head at him.

“Oh, can ye…pull an armpit?”

“Poor baby,” Bree said, more in a mocking way than sympathetic.

Wake put his hand over his heart and looked at Bree like a wounded animal. She kissed him softly.

“Does that help?” Bree asked in a quiet voice.

Wake nodded.

“Good, now we were talking about food,” she said, leaving Wake standing there as she went back around the corner into the kitchen.

Wake furrowed his brow in disbelief she would just leave him there, but soon realized the best thing he could do was take his lumps and move on. A slight smile took shape on his lips, and he moved slowly to join Bree.

~~~~~
This is my annual birthday post, because your comments are my best gifts. This chapter is for the Jamie fans who like him being a daddy. (I had a far more eloquent wording the first time around, but it took almost 45 minutes to get this chapter posted, and it kept eating my off the cuff comments until I almost gave up.)

“Big day ahead?” Claire asked as we woke, rolling over me to look at Alex beyond me. She waved at him and smiled as Alex cooed at her. I held her around the upper thighs as she reached over to pick up our boy and pull him into bed with us.

“Good morning Alex, madainn mhath dhut,” she added in Gaelic, as was her tradition every morning.

“Madainn mhath dhut,” I repeated.

Alex turned and reached for me, much to Claire’s chagrin.

“I thought we’d established that I was more than a milk machine, but here you go, wanting your Da over me,” she said to Alex, maintaining her bright voice.

She shook her head slowly, looking at me with a slightly pained look in her eyes, still clinging to the squirming bundle with arms outstretched toward me.

“Doona worry. I think he does it to play us off each other – remember how he played me the other day, refusing the bottle -insisting on the breast.”

“But he will always be more attentive to you,” she declared.

Claire pushed Alex onto my chest and he pushed up on his elbows, smiling at me as he arched his back up. I put my arms around him as I sat and he cooed.

“Perhaps, but…he could no more deny you than I could deny Brianna. He’s got the look of you, and I do believe he’s developing your sense of humor.”

Claire smiled appreciatively.

“So, what is today’s schedule, other than swim class number five?” she asked.

“Och, we’ve got a big day to be sure. Class and then home for lunch, and if he’s not too fussy today, we submit the paperwork for his passport and pick up a few groceries on the way home, and then I have laundry to do and a few other sundries, time permitting.”

“I guess I don’t know half of what you do each day – picturing you lounging on the couch, snuggling with Alex while you watch TV, while I am off toiling at my job.”

Claire smiled, obviously teasing as she turned the table on the ‘stay-at-home-mom’ myth of not working hard.

“Just as long as you have a hot meal waiting in the kitchen and let me have my way with you tonight,” she almost laughed as she slid off the bed.

I watched her leave the room and then turned to Alex and said, “You know how lucky we are to have her? Your mam - she’s everything.”

“See you all for the final class next week,” the instructor bade us as we exited the water.

After getting Alex dry and dressed, he called out ‘ba’, knowing I always give him a bottle after our time in the pool. He enjoyed his bottle and gave off a mighty burp when prompted. He seemed in fine fettle, relaxed and happy, so I decided after a stop home to pick up the documents needed, and have a quick bite myself, we’d be off to apply for Alex’s passport so we could all go to Scotland to
see Bree. Claire’s excitement about getting back to Lallybroch to see both the completed house and Brianna were infectious, and I must admit, I miss the lass. It was the right thing to have her go back to finish the house, but I’d gladly have her tucked by my side for our weekly movie nights. I know we have many years to learn of each other, but…it feels…imperative that I make these years count – while Claire can be a part of it. If only I’d been able to find them sooner…no…regrets just waste more time.

With all the proper bits of official paper needed to determine my and Claire’s identities, and Alex’s birth certificate in tow, I strapped the boy to my front and headed out to the nearest T stop. The weather was nice enough for the walk, and finding a place to park would likely take longer than the drive. I got several nice smiles from passers-by when they noticed Alex. One woman came up to me, beaming.

“It is so heartwarming to see young fathers take such an active role in raising their children.”

I smiled and nodded, all the time thinking how surprised she’d be to find out how old this ‘young father’ really was!

We reached the office we needed after a few train switches and a few more minutes of walking. I know I could have submitted the forms on-line, but I had qualms about sending the copies of our passports and birth certificates. I knew it likely copies would be made to accompany the application, but somehow the notion of them being copied in the office seemed less disturbing.

There were only five people ahead of me in an office that handled any number bureaucratic transactions. I signed in and waited for my turn. Alex had nearly fallen asleep against the warmth of my chest, stirring slightly as I took a seat. I learned that five people ahead of me was roughly equivalent to five minutes remaining in an American football game – it could stretch far beyond its noted or expected length.

Finally being called to the window, the person on the other side was rather surprised to see Alex strapped to me, as he had been inconspicuous.

“Why, he’s so well behaved,” she remarked, “I never would have known he was here.”

“He’s a good boy,” I said with a nod.

“What can I do for you today, sir?”

“I need to procure a passport for him so we can go visit his sister in Scotland. I hope I’ve brought all we need.”

I handed over the filled out forms, and waited as she asked for each of my and Claire’s passports, birth certificates…all but blood tests and hair samples were taken it seemed, but I was assured all necessary documents had been copied and made into a “packet” that would be submitted for approval.

“You could have sent this all on-line, you know.”

“So I was told…but I like dealing face to face when I can.”

It had taken far longer than expected, but should something go wrong in the process from here on, at least it was nothing I had done wrong. From there, Alex and I went to some shops, ending at the market to pick up a few groceries for tonight’s meal. All in all a successful day out, but hardly a day completed.

Once home for the day, there were domestic matters to attend to. Since Alex spent most of our day out snuggled against my chest, he was well rested and of no mind to take a nap, so I kept him by my side as best I could while still accomplishing the tasks at hand. First was the laundry. I was several loads behind just now, needing to do a load of bed linens as well as clothing – that’s one thing I had grown to understand – having a small child means always needing to do laundry, and then learning the moment something is clean to be worn, it has been outgrown.

I got the washer churning with Alex strapped to me, but when it came time to fold anything, he was facing outward now, and little hands got in the way, even toppling an entire basket of towels. Fortunately, I had not yet gotten around to folding those.

The now empty basket landed with a skitter, the sound pricking up Alex’s ears.

“Gaa-ah,” he yelled, reaching for the basket,
“You want that?” I asked him, crouching down to the basket. He patted the upturned bottom of the basket with his open palm, a satisfying thump his reward. He repeated the motion, deriving a nice rhythm before stopping to look up at me and smile. He giggled happily at the conclusion of his first drum solo.

We headed upstairs where my first job awaited – dishes. I tried to wash as I go, but sometimes dishes got put aside and ignored, and I’d not gotten to last night’s dinner dishes, nor this morning’s breakfast ones, so I had a good sink-full to take care of. At first Alex sat happily at my feet while I stood at the sink, but my ankles became boring after a while, and I found myself retrieving the lad every few minutes, leaving foamy soap patches on Alex, and getting precious little washing done. Now that Alex was beginning to be mobile, though not walking proper, there was no just putting him down and coming back to find him where he’d been put. He was like an amoeba – stretching off in different directions, seeming to be everywhere and anywhere all at the same time. I knew there were several items yet from those we’d brought home from Claire’s hospital closet baby store that could become useful to keep Alex out from under foot and safely entertained, so I poked through the boxes finding both a baby swing that could be set up either on an A-frame or in a doorway, and an entertainment center/creeping stroller with lockable wheels. After reviewing the instructions for both, the stroller was much easier to institute, and simplicity won the day.

I parked the stroller out of the traffic flow in the kitchen, but close enough for Alex not to feel ignored while I set to preparing dinner. I suppose I could have placed him in his high chair, but I was afraid he’d topple it trying to reach out for me. He had come close to tipping over with a vehement display one evening, so the stroller being closer to the ground seemed a wiser choice, and would be transportable to another room should need be. Maybe once I could give Alex my full focus I would unlock the wheels and test the boy’s mobility.

The supper finally set to cook, I unlocked the wheels on the stroller, rolled Alex to the closed pocket doors of the dining room, and stepped back, my hand held out to keep Alex in place while I got as far back from him as I could. I crouched down to eye level and beckoned him to come to me. At first he kept his feet tucked up off the floor, sitting in the sling seat, but a lunge toward me set the wheels to spinning, and he began touching his toes down to propel himself forward. He clearly liked the mobility the stroller offered as he began to mrogate his way to my arms. I plucked him out of the stroller and stood as he triumphantly reached me. I held him tight to my chest.

“Gle’ mhath…very good – you’ll be walking on your own in no time, getting into all sorts of mischief if you’re a thing like me…Och, I wish yer mam could see you. Well, in a few months’ time we’ll be back in Scotland. Perhaps being wi’ ye everyday, seeing the amazing things you get up to, and bein’ surrounded by family…I’d never twist her arm, but I bet you could charm her. I know bein’ a doctor is as much a part of her as being’ a mother, but…thoughts for another time – speaking of which, we’ve got a bit of time now, and I bought a little something this afternoon, as you witnessed. Perhaps some zen knitting will do us both good.”

I had only intended to make a start at my knitting, but the hypnotic quality of click-clack found me all but finished when I heard Claire coming in for the evening.

“Oh, that smells so good,” I heard her exclaim. I smiled at the sound of her voice, and Alex sat up straight, clearly knowing the sound of his Mam’s voice. He yelled out, “Ah-ah,” not quite mama, but a good start in that direction. I nodded as the warmth of it filled my heart. Claire seemed to instinctively know I’d be down in the media room.

“I thought you said you didn’t have time to sit around,” she purred as she came down the ramp, “but here you are, just as I said you’d be.”

She leaned over and gave me a kiss.

“I needed a bit of down time, but that doesna mean it wasna productive time,” I replied, holding up
my knitting, “I click-clacked socks for Alex – I found the yarn while we were out today – a nice, fine cotton, should feel good against his feet.”

I handed the completed sock to Claire, I had yet to cast off the final stitches of the second one. She smoothed the stitches between her fingers.

“I’d take a pair myself.”

“Aye, well, I’d have to get more yarn – your feet are a might bigger than Alex’s –and I’d have to clip your talons again.”

Claire smiled at the reminder of when I cut her nails, the look on her face making it clear she remembered what that pedicure led to. She sat next to me and leaned her body across mine.

“I wouldn’t mind,” she purred, turning to look at Alex as the boy reached out for Claire’s short maintained haircut.

“Hello, Alex. So good to see you,” Claire said to our son, turning until she lay across my lap and reached out to him, slowly unfurling the fingers that were sunk into her hair. She took his hands and patted them to her cheeks as she kissed at him and made a slight clicking sound that made Alex laugh.

~~~~~~

Claire was in a good mood, relaxed this evening. The two of us took Alex back upstairs and got him to move about in the stroller. He really began to enjoy himself, almost jumping up and down with excitement over being able to go from one end of the room to the other so quickly. When it came close to meal time, Claire settled Alex by having him nurse. The boy was calmed and primed for further food as she did not let him drink his fill. We catered to Alex early on in the meal, cooked carrots with serrated edges to help his grip were in the offing tonight. He wasna excited by the choice, actually falling asleep with one piece pinched in his fingers.

After the supper, the three of us returned to the media room and snuggled in for a movie. Alex awoke briefly, but I was the only one who stayed awake for the film. I had survived yet another day as a “stay-at-home” father, and I was all the happier for it. Getting to see our son grow and learn, and be an active part of that development is something that could only be happening in this day and age. I am a man of means, having pinched every penny I ever earned in hopes that someday I would have just this – Claire in my life, and the ability to take care of her, though she has taken care of herself and raised our daughter quite ably without me. So I now have one more dream to fulfill – returning home, and having the life I always dreamed of…at Lallybroch. Perhaps it willna be a permanent situation, just a dream we live out several weeks at a time, only to return to Boston so that Claire may find her fulfillment. No matter – either way, all the elements have come together…even if one of those elements is in Scotland.

~~~~~
Two beautiful days that got me and the chickens outside this week seem to have started the rejuvenation of my mind and gotten my creative juices flowing - most of this chapter is newly written, woven in around a few pieces I've had for a very long time - finally got over that hump of being stuck just below 780 pages, and just in the last few days I've cranked out a few pages. I know my Jamie and Claire fans are sighing over my focus on Brianna and Wake, but there is a lot of terrain to cover between those two before Jamie and Claire arrive at Lollybroch - hold on, when they're all together it's something else.

Wake’s hands lazily ran over Bree’s skin, waking her.

“I can’t right now,” she murmured, resettling her head on the pillow.

“Nor can I, actually. I just canna keep my hands off ye. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

Bree laughed once.

“I thought I was supposed to say things like that, you know, because you’re my first ‘lover’?”

“Aye, but how would you know? ‘Best’ and ‘first’ don’t often go together, at least when it comes to sex. I’ve done this enough to know.”

“Well, I don’t plan to test your theory. I’m perfectly happy to have you as my ‘only’.”

Wake hummed seductively, and kissed the back of her neck. His arm snaked under her and his hand came around to settle over Bree’s belly button.

“Funny how you can sleep perfectly well on this side of the bed after we’ve had sex,” Wake observed.

Bree smiled, her cheeks pinking up a bit.

“It’s different…than trying to sleep with you next to me. It must be the endorphins, or the exhaustion, god, after screaming myself hoarse, and the things you make my body do…”

“Like I said, best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Wake reconfirmed, nuzzling her neck.

“Go back to sleep. It’s still dark out,” Bree directed Wake.

His free hand cupped her shoulder and then ran down her arm. He sank his fingers between Bree’s and clutched their hands together.

“You sleep. I’ll watch you,” Wake whispered, his breath tickling her neck.
A one-sided smile crept up Brianna’s face as she drifted back to sleep.

~~~~~

A small number of workers arrived this morning, just Callum MacDougal, his apprentice, and a handful of his men, as well as the landscaping crew. Paint, tile, escutcheon plates and the like, were the main business of the day, as well as a good amount of clean-up and furniture set up and arrangement. Wake and Brianna were kept busy as they would be called upon to give final approval as projects were finished off. The rest of the time, they were in the study, looking over the blueprints and marking off the punch list making sure nothing was forgotten.

It seemed almost impossible that the project was barely a week from finishing up. The transformation of Lallybroch from the near wreck it had become to the renewed place it was now had been amazing. It seemed even more impossible how far Brianna had come from the scared, newly graduated architect afraid to venture out on her own she had been when she started this project. She could still experience doubts, but now, very few of them had to do with her ability as an architect.

But just as her professional confidence was growing, personal insecurities were beginning to sprout and take root in the back of Brianna’s mind. Once the construction was done, the house would no longer be hers, it would belong to her parents, and she did not know what that meant for her and Wake. Would they be coming to take up residence? If they did, would they expect her to live with them? How would they react to learning about Wake’s and her relationship? Would noise canceling headphones block out the sound of her having sex with Wake, and would her parents wear them? Bree found herself deep in contemplation with these thoughts as she sat at her drawing table, fingers twisting a pencil around and around.

“You didn’t hear a word I just said,” Wake’s voice broke through the fog.

“Hmm?”

“Where were you, ‘cause you were’na here?”

“Sorry,” she said with a shake of her head.

“You’ll be able to sleep in soon,” Wake offered with a lazy smile.

Bree shook her head.

“It’s not tiredness, I just have a lot on my mind. Not the least of which of whether I’ll get another job after this without my dad giving it to me.”

“You will have jobs comin’ out yer ears after this. You have a talent…undisputed skill, and a commanding presence. It doesna matter how you got this first job, you proved you deserved it… and on a personal note, I’m damn glad you took this job, or I wouldna have been there that December day…”

Wake’s voice had slipped to a whisper, and he had his lips close to Bree’s ear…

“Knock, knock,” Callum MacDougal said as he approached the study.
Wake and Bree both jumped slightly, taking to their feet. Callum was broadly smiling as he poked his nose into the study.

“Sorry if I’m interruptin’.”

“Och, not to worry. We’re just trying not to nod off as things crawl toward completion. I was trying to assure Bree this is normal when a project nears its end, but she fell asleep sittin’ there.”

“I did not fall asleep,” Brianna protested, shifting her eyes as if Wake was crazy.

Callum laughed.

“You two…I do enjoy your banter so. I just thought I’d let you know the landscapers feel the rain has picked up too much this afternoon. They’re just making mud out there right now, so they’ve knocked off for the day. You’ve actually been quite lucky with the weather during the build, lass, but I agree with them today. We’d be able to do our bit even in a monsoon, but they were plotching about and makin’ a right wallow of the place.”

“Would your men like to head home before it gets any worse?” Brianna honestly inquired.

“My men moved to the indoor projects when scaling a ladder got chancy. I just came in to ask if you’d like my men to help arrange some of the furniture they’ve seen comin’ off the trucks. No sense breaking yer back if you’ve got help about.”

Bree smiled sheepishly as she glanced at her feet for a second.

“That’d…be nice, just not the North room – that’s off limits.”

Callum nodded with a grin of his own.

“Of course, lass, just like we respected the third floor, as it’s your private domain. I don’t think anyone but Wake has been there since you started livin’ here – when he worked on the fireplace,” Mr. MacDougal quickly clarified.

Despite his clarification, Bree’s cheeks went pink with the mention of Wake having been in her third floor bedroom. She traced her foot in a semicircle on the floor, her hands gravitating behind her back where she clasped them together as she went shy for a moment.

“Um…” she tried to speak, “Probably right, and I appreciate that. I wasn’t sure it would work with me living here during construction, but it has been convenient to not have to drive in each morning from someplace far off.”

“Aye, and ye know that place would have been the manse with my parents,” Wake interjected, slowly shaking his head, “And that would have been near impossible…Don’t get me wrong, I love my parents, but living with them…”

Callum nodded knowingly.

“Och, lad, I’ve been there, many a year ago, but…” he shook his head, clearly remembering a time from his past.

Brianna went with Callum to start directing the arranging of large furniture items while Wake stuck with the blueprints and punch list, Brianna nodding with a bit of relief, knowing she would want to lean into Wake’s ear and get his input if he were by her side for this.

By the end, it had been an exhausting day of hurry up and wait. It was so close to being done, but
still there was a half a sheet of items yet to be completed. Bree was sure it would take a better part of a week to get it all done without anything becoming a rush job. But right now, Bree could not wait for the remaining workers to go home for the night. She needed to be alone with Wake, needed to soak in his warmth, needed to be infused with his confidence in her abilities and their relationship. She just needed to feel his arms around her.

~~~~~

Bree’s fears were beginning to collect, becoming less distant, and she was holding it all in. She didn’t want to ruin the almost dream-like place her life and relationship were residing. And while Bree had the power to control what happened while she was awake, her subconscious had no such gatekeepers.

All seemed well as Brianna and Wake made the transition from daytime professionals to nighttime lovers. Their interaction was wild, loud, and extremely enjoyable for both of them. Wake hoped he wouldn’t regret encouraging Bree to explore as he’d found himself on the end of some rough handling, but her impulses showed good lover’s instincts.

After several hours of deep sleep, Bree began thrashing, pushing everything away as she kicked and growled in her sleep. Wake tried to hold her, soothe her mind, but she fought even harder to be unfettered.

“No, let me out!” she yelled, getting loose and springing to her feet in an adrenaline fueled fear.

Wake pulled the covers with him and held them protectively in front of himself as he got to his feet on the other side of the bed. He turned on the bedside lamp and stared in worry across the bed at Bree. The light was dim, but it lit them both just enough.

“You OK?” he asked, genuinely scared.

She looked around, seeming confused, like she didn’t know where she was.

“Yeah, I’m…bad dream.”

“Aye…I would say so…tell me about it?”

She nodded shakily and extended a hand to Wake. He threw the bed clothes back on the bed and reached for her hand. She held his hand very tightly as she sat back on the bed and pulled a blanket up. Wake very carefully sat next to her, trying to judge how close he should get. He just sat close, waiting for Bree to be ready. Bree let out a sigh and dropped her head onto Wake’s shoulder, slowly lacing her arms around him.

“I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?” she asked.

“No…scared me a little,” he added as he caressed her cheek. “What was it about?”

“You’ll think this is strange.”

Wake smiled, wondering how she could top her intrinsic quirkiness.

“After we finished the house, we…had no place to live, so we moved into your flat – with all your
roommates. But there was only one bedroom, and one bed. We got in, and then two other guys got in on your side, pushing us over. I was about to get out when two other guys got in on my side. We were squished in the middle, and strange people were rubbing up against me. I had to get out, so I started kicking and flailing and screaming.”

Bree nestled against Wake’s chest and let out a little whimper.

“Och, lass…I’d never let that happen.”

“I know, I guess I’m just worried and it came out in my dreams.”

“Whatever I can do to soothe yer mind, consider it done…rub your shoulders, give ye a bath…slather you in lotion,” he said with a hint of laughter, “…anything that might make you feel better, even if it’s just ogling me at length…”

Now Bree laughed lightly, still clinging to Wake’s chest.

“You can always bring the brightness out of the dark, can’t you? I love that about you.”

Bree took his face into her hands, words no longer needed. His hands stacked on top of hers as she pulled him into a kiss. She let out the rest of her breath with a sigh. They settled back on the mattress, Wake shaking the blanket until it covered them completely. He held her loosely at first, inquiring with a look whether she wanted him to hold her more tightly. She nodded her want to have him close, and after leaning back to turn off the light, Wake enveloped Brianna, holding her close to his heart.

~~~~~

Brianna carefully slipped from under the covers leaving Wake drowsing. She looked back at him lying there and smiled. She took in a deep breath and released it along with any tension in her body, so thankful Wake could listen to her fears, offer to help, but not try to ‘fix’ the problem. Soon enough Bree knew her parents would have to know about Wake, but for now, he was hers alone. It didn’t matter that Wake’s family knew. They were isolated on the Lallybroch lands. They were free to explore their relationship as if they were shipwrecked on a desert island, and Brianna was more than happy for that arrangement.

Returning from the bathroom, Bree pulled up a flap of blanket and settled, but continued to hold up the blanket while she scanned her eyes up and down Wake’s backside. She traced the fingers of one hand up from the back of his knee, over his rear and gently up the line of his spine.

“Did ye give me a good ogle, then?” Wake asked, muffled by the pillow.

“Uh-huh,” Bree hummed.

“Did ye enjoy it?” he burred.

“More each time,” she whispered in his ear.

“Good.”

She draped herself half across his back and nestled in with a smile on her lips, and a sigh. The
warmth of him felt good beneath her.

~~~~~

The week progressed much the same day to day. The weather cleared enough for the landscapers to return for Thursday and Friday, but it became clear they would need another week or so to finish their work. Pieces of furniture were slowly finding their way to their final destinations, with the exception of the bed for the North room, which had yet to arrive. What had been empty rooms at the beginning of the week were taking shape. The couches that lined the new wall of livingroom windows and dividing wall between the livingroom and the doorhall finally had their cushions, and the futon and chairs for the media room, which had been the ladies’ parlor, across the hall from the study, were put in place, yet the electronic components were coming later. Bree took pictures of everything to send to Jamie, so wanting to share the progress with her father, but afraid anything she could personally communicate to him would result in telling things she wasn’t ready to reveal.

When the work concluded on Friday, neither of them felt like cooking. Bree actually felt like taking a nap, so Wake headed into town for a take away meal. Wake also took the opportunity to seek out some advice from Jem.

~~~~~

Jem was about to enter his office when he saw the back of the head of someone waiting for him.

“Hello,” he warmly greeted as he crossed the threshold. “Oh, Wake, what brings ye?”

Wake couldn’t keep the smile off his lips, and he couldn’t make the words come out through them, either.

“Things going well, then? With Brianna?”

Wake turned bright red.

“Better than you thought?”

“She’s amazing – I mean, it’s a given she’s beautiful, but she’s smart, funny, and she has passion coming out of her ears – was it like this for you? When you met Ruth?”

“Still is,” Jem said with his own sheepish grin filling his face. “Sounds like you’re under her spell.”

“And happy to be there, brother,” Wake happily replied. “It’s the most…heavenly experience I’ve ever had, especially…” he trailed off.

“Especially?” Jem refused to let him drop.

“The tower…the broch,” Wake breathed out.

Jem nodded and smiled.
“Special place for you two?”

“Och, aye,” Wake said as the biggest smile filled his face.

“But…” he said slowly, “…she’s afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” Jem asked him.

“I don’t know for sure – afraid of the future in general, I guess, afraid of people knowing about us. Bree keeps things locked up inside, and ye canna push. She has to…be ready…to let it out. I wish she could trust that there’s nothing she can tell me that will drive me away.”

Jem nodded.

“Well, she has her reasons – she was very closed off for many years. It’s just these last couple of years she’s come back to being the open hearted person she was as a child,” Jem told him, walking a fine line about how much to reveal to his brother.

“I wish I remembered what she was like younger, but I don’t.”

“You wouldn’t – it wouldn’t help anyway – you were what? Eight when they moved away, and you were at Uni for that one long visit they made here. But she’s…a changed person just since her father’s come into her life – from the beginning of their stay for the wedding, until the day she came back to work on Lallybroch, there was a transformation. But you are right, she keeps her own council.”

“She had a nightmare the other night. It rather forced her hand to confess she was troubled, but even so, I doona think I’ve heard the whole of it.”

“Probably not if it feels that way, but I’d say you’re doing things right. Be there for support, not solutions. She needs time to build the kind of trust yer talkin’ about, and ye havna been together all that long. Clearly you’ve earned the lass’s trust as far as her heart and body are concerned, her mind and soul need your patience.”

“Aye,” Wake said as a sigh, nodding, “And she has that, no matter how long she needs. I just needed to hear it from someone I trust to tell me the unvarnished truth.”

“Always, brother,” Jem countered with a nod.

~~~~~

“What’s all this?” Wake asked as he shimmied past the boxes in the hall.

“They delivered my bed while you were gone – woke me up, but were gone before I could make it downstairs, so I had to haul it all in by myself,” I told him, leaning in for a kiss. “Please tell me you got double of everything we talked about?”

“Aye – triple in one case. Table set?”

“Of course – god I’m starving.”

We unloaded the bags of takeout – I was glad we’d decided on Chinese tonight because it meant a
little of this and a little of that, and while I was starving, I was also peck-ish, not wanting all the meal to be one flavor. Wake placed one of the bags down without opening it and I raised my eyebrows at him and tilted my head toward his final purchase.

“Och, no big deal. I just wanted a dram – whisky – a good one. I’ll gi’ ye a nip if ye like,” Wake offered with a solicitous smirk.

“No,” I replied with a single shake of my head.

“Ye…don’t object to it being in the house, do ye?” he asked me.

“Not as long as you don’t try forcing me to have some.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it – you’re already too much to handle sober.”

We worked our way through carton after carton, but unlike that early Chinese food dinner with my parents, where I was up for the challenge, we took a page out of my mom’s book, and neither Wake nor I pretended we could actually get all the food we wanted to our mouths with chop sticks. I know it’s supposed to be part of the cultural experience, but when I’m starving and in no mood to struggle, I want the food to get there, not end up in my lap.

I don’t remember too much more of the night, except that curiosity got the better of me.

“Um…I’d like to try it…the whisky. I’ve tasted it on your breath when you’ve come back from the pub, so…”

Wake poured a small amount and I grabbed the glass before I changed my mind and gulped it quickly just as Wake said, “just a sip now.”

Due to my inexperience with alcohol, one sip would have been more than enough to fog my brain, but I had swallowed considerably more, and the effect was sudden and strong. I remember the sound of giggling, but if it was me or Wake, I’m not sure. I did learn one thing – I don’t think I have a taste for whisky. A lifetime of being a teetotaler had left my palate with no appreciation for drink. I’m better off with cream soda, but thankfully, Wake has enough experience, and he guided me through my first drinking experience without so much as a headache to show for it. But it was still a good thing I had an entire weekend to get back to being myself.

Wake woke me in the morning with a kiss and an apologetic look on his face.

“Sorry, lass. I never shoulda brought the bottle home.”

“Not your fault,” I grumbled, testing whether I was ready to sit up.

“Was I an awful drunk? Did I do…anything…stupid?” I asked, hearing how pathetic it sounded as it came out of my mouth.

“You mean after gulping down the whole glass of whisky? Nah.”

Wake smirked at me.

As I looked down, I realized I was still wearing yesterday’s clothes.

“You could have undressed me – I trust you,” I said, tugging at my bra where the band had begun to bite into my skin.

“Perhaps, but I didna trust myself last night.”
I smiled and could feel the blush on my cheeks more than usual.

“I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted.”

“Mmm flattered,” he hummed as he kiss my temple and pulled me back against him, “that I had that much self-control was a miracle. You were glowing last night like an open flame – but better you were not exposed to flames – it would have been explosive.”

His voice was warm and tinged with the impish humor I was growing to love.

There was something about the way he was holding me that made my whole body tingle. I felt sure…secure…safe.

~~~~~

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