Flood my Mornings

Two years after Culloden, Jamie accidentally falls through the stones, finding himself in 1950.

from the Tumblr prompt: "Imagine if Jamie somehow made his way through the stones after Culloden, found out where Claire was, made his way there and surprised her in Boston"
Chapter 1

April, 1748

Jamie kicked Juniper hard in the flanks, though it produced only a fraction of the desired effect. She was a tired old thing, thin and hungry as the rest of the residents of Lallybroch these days, and was accustomed to plodding through potato fields, not galloping across hills and glens. She was, therefore, making her displeasure with the current state of things abundantly clear.

“Courage, Nip,” he said, at her latest snort, as he reached down to pat her neck soothingly. “It isna far now.” Not far at all, he thought, catching sight of his destination in the distance. Still, he didn’t make any move to slow their pace. It would be morning in just a few hours, and he didn’t know how far behind the soldiers would be, now. It had been afternoon when he’d last spotted them far behind on the road through the winding glens.

It wasn’t as though he were trying to outrun them indefinitely. He’d laid the plans for this himself, in fact. Jenny and Ian had fought him vehemently for weeks on the matter, but after the close brush with the patrol three weeks back—that had earned Ian a deep gash over the eye from the butt of an interrogator’s musket—they had finally relented. Between them, they had arranged for one of the tenants to report the whereabouts of Red Jamie to the Redcoats; that is, to report that the known traitor had been seen galloping east.

No, he wouldn’t run for much longer. He wasn’t even running from them at all. He knew his fate lay in an English prison or with a hangman’s noose, and he’d come to peace with it. At least Lallybroch wouldn’t starve for a long time yet, by consequence.

There was just one thing he needed to do. Only one place he wanted to spend his last night of freedom...or last night on earth, as the case might be.

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The cottage door opened at his touch, creaking and groaning on its hinges. It was all the same.

The holes in the roof...He remembered each one, shining like stars above Claire’s head, her curls falling down around him.

The fallen-down rear wall, open to the elements...The last place he’d laid eyes on her; last place he’d joined with her.

The bare, filthy boards of the floor...The spot where he’d last held her, felt her breathing against his chest as she slept.

He laid there now, spread himself right on the floor and curled himself against her again. She was warm in his arms, her body wedged tight against him. He could feel the tiny swell of her belly round and firm in his hand.

He’d be over a year old, by now, the bairn. Starting to take his first steps, perhaps. Beginning to speak. Jamie smiled and let tears fall freely at the image of a tiny red-headed lad toddling happily into Claire’s waiting arms, her sweet face beaming with joy and love as she swept him up and held him against her shoulder. They’ll have one another, at least, he thought, seeing Claire kiss the boy’s
cheek. God, how frightening it was to feel both so full and so empty at such a sight.

“Take care of your mam, for me,” he whispered, “….wee Brian.”

The shaft of morning light brought him back to his senses. He lay still for a moment longer. Ought he just to lay here? Savor these moments, these memories up until the very end? Part of him wanted very much to do so; but another part, a previously unknown part of him, compelled him to his feet and began walking as if he’d always planned it.

He hadn’t had the heart at the time, to venture up the hill after Claire had disappeared. He’d known she was gone. The knowing of it was enough…more than enough, both to comfort him and to slay him with grief. The seeing with his own eyes hadn’t seemed important, or even something he could have borne, at the time. But he trudged up the hill now, something in him needing to lay eyes on it.

God, how he hated the sight of them: these damned stones. The last time he’d seen them, been on this hill, he’d been trying to send her back. He’d prayed to God for the courage not to beg her to stay. What wouldn’t he give, now, for the chance to tear her through the veils of time back through to him? To grasp her tight against him, scream that she was his, damn it, and that he wouldn’t be parted from her, no matter the consequences!

But no, he chastened himself, as he walked trance-like toward the cleft stone. He would make the same choice again, were it given to him. To see her and the child safe was worth every second, every hour, every year of grief and agony. Even now, it was all that mattered.

And she was his, forever. She knew it, too, wherever she might be.

He reached out for the stone, the thing that held the memory of Claire’s last touch in this lifetime, and felt his breath hot on his lips as he whispered. “‘Til our life shall be done, Claire.”

He remembered that the stone felt surprisingly warm under his palm.

And that the blackness screamed.

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He awoke, groaning, blinking up at a roof of white canvas. He felt as though he’d been struck in the head and drunk a gallon of whiskey after. The former came as no surprise; but why should the soldiers have given him drink after bludgeoning him? Come to that, why should they have laid him on a cot under a tent, rather than just shackling him to a tree?

He made to sit up, but a gentle hand laid itself on his chest, pushing him gently back down. To his utter shock, an equally gentle—and female—voice accompanied it. “Now, sir, dinna sit up just yet, if ye please. Doctor Chisholm will be over to speak wi’ ye very shortly. He tended to ye while ye were sleeping. Nothing wrong that we could find, but he’ll want to take another look just to be certain.”

Stunned, Jamie obeyed the lady’s request—clearly she meant him no harm—but darted his eyes around madly. It was a large tent, with a certain amount of hubbub going on outside of it, but whether from the relative dimness or the unfocused state of his vision, he could make out very little other than a few cots, some tables, and figures moving about dressed in white. Through the open flap of the tent, though, he caught the unmistakable flash of red coats and muskets. He stiffened, and turned his eyes to the woman, clad in white. “Is this an army camp then?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

She laughed and smiled sweetly. “‘Tis only the medical tent. Some of the revelers were up at Craigh
na Dun this morning and found ye passed out cold by the big stones. They couldna revive ye, so they brought ye here. Quicker than driving ye all the way back to Inverness. They supposed ye must have come from here anyway, with your clothes and all. What were ye doing up there so far from the reenactments, if I might ask?”

Before Jamie could begin to make sense of this, a short, bespectacled man in a thin white coat appeared against the canvas overhead. “Feeling better now, are we?” The man didn’t wait for an answer, and looked down at a small board in his hands, tapping it. “Well, other than dehydration and what appears to be a shocking degree of malnutrition, I couldna find anything the matter with ye. It’s a hot day for April, so it isna terribly worrying that ye should have been overheated by the climb up to the fairy hill, even someone as big as yourself, sir.”

“Aye, erm, aye, must have just forgotten to—to mind my canteen,” Jamie muttered. He swung his legs over the side of the cot and sat up.

“Before we discharge ye,” said the white-coated man, putting out a staying arm, “I just wish to check a few more things. Rule out the possibility of brain damage, ken. Won’t take but a moment or two.”

Discharge him? Was that a euphemism for the noose? Why bother declaring him sound, then? Nonetheless Jamie sat like stone as the man examined his eyes and hands. For what, precisely, he couldn’t have said.

“Aye, good, all seems to be normal there,” the man said, approvingly. “For good measure, though, just a few questions for determining disorientation. What is your name?”

Jamie hesitated, before saying warily, “Alexander Malcolm.”

“Excellent. Aaaand,” the man said, holding up a hand, “how many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three,” Jamie grunted.

“Splendid, quite right. And, what is the year?”

“1748,” he said, impatiently. Lord almighty, be done with this, and tell me what is to be my fate.

To his surprise, both man and woman laughed. The woman beamed fondly at him. “It’s most admirable of ye to stay in character, sir, but ye’ve got to get yer facts right! Its ‘46, not ‘48! Ye’ve the accent of a highlander, to be sure—I canna believe ye wouldna know the proper date for Culloden!”

The doctor chuckled. “What I meant was, Mr. Malcolm, what year is it now? Today?”

Jamie’s mouth tried to form words (Seventeen…) but there was no air to bring them forth. He could only make small choked noises and look wide-eyed from one to the other, his brain a frenzied stew of panic as the screaming of the stones filled his ears and memory.

“It’s…1950, lad…” The doctor was tilting his head and surveying Jamie as though he were a deranged animal about to spring. “Do ye…really no’ ken that?”

Before even stopping to think, Jamie lurched off the table, ignoring their protests, and stumbled out of the tent. He ran, unseeing, blinking hard in the blinding sunlight. There were people about, a lot of them. He dodged figure after figure, jumping at flashes of red and the sounds of distant pipes. Pipes…in a British camp?

A voice—loud and shrill as demon’s—suddenly roared overhead. He clutched his ears and fell to his
knees, cursing and praying in true and desperate terror. The words seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere and once, a hellish barrage that shuddered through his very bones.

“Musicians and actors, please report to your stations! The memorial ceremony for the two hundred and fourth anniversary of the Battle of Culloden will begin momentarily.”
Chapter 2

Jamie staggered like a ghost over the battlefield of Culloden—and what was he, if not a ghost?—as the hellish voice continued to boom out overhead: “We honor our noble dead, those who laid down their lives for the cause, for Scotland and for our Bonnie Prince!”

//canonfire/
//corbie calls/

1950. People. So many people. Their clothing, strange; their voices harsh and grating to his ear. Crushes of them, everywhere he turned still more, and more, and more, yammering and laughing shrilly and—

//the scent of blood and powder/


//never-ending screams of pain as men are cut down and blown apart/


//as -friends- are cut down… as -kinsmen- are blown apart/

He sighted a gap between the perimeter of tents, and stumbled through it, gasping desperately for air.

//his godfather’s bloodied, broken face/

He fell to the ground beneath a tree and vomited. It was nothing but bile, but it burned terribly, adding to the maelstrom of assaulting sensations—both present and remembered—that had overtaken his body. He dropped to his side like a felled beast, covering his head. Everything was spinning so fast. The screams of Culloden melded with the screams of the stones, all seeming to tear apart his every thought and bone and breath, Charybdis sucking him downward into the sweet darkness of despair.

…but something else was cutting slowly through the panic, something pale and gleaming, like the surface of an egg, fresh from the hen. This was no land-dwelling thing, though; it was rising slowly, just becoming visible beneath the dark, roiling sea…

1946, she’d said…putting her back in 1948. So, for her, it would now be…

Holy Christ Almighty.

Jamie felt the white, buoyant thing break the surface of the water and rise up into the air, carrying him with it. Up and up he soared, leaving the ocean and the shore far below, laughing and weeping and rejoicing; for, somewhere far below, somewhere on this land or this sea, she was there, alive…. and reachable.

CLAIRE

“You alright, man?!?”

Jamie jerked back reflexively, banging hard against the tree trunk. Three men were staring down at him. Their clothes were strange, even compared with what he’d seen of how folk dressed in this
time: baggier and noticeably dirtier. Their hair was long, though, like his, and they were looking down with kind concern in their eyes.

“The last we saw you, you were passed out up at the big rocks,” said the one wearing colored spectacles. “You don’t look much better, though….Did the doctors not treat you, man?”

Jamie blinked. Their accents were like nothing he’d ever heard, and it took him a second too long to conjure up a proper response.

“If you are ok?” the one with blond hair said slowly, enunciating carefully and giving him a wary, pitying look. “Do-You-Speak-English?” He turned aside to his companions, whispering, “Should we take him to the medical tent again?”

“No, I-I’m fine,” Jamie stammered out, rising to his feet with great effort. He managed a bit of leg and a conciliatory, “F-forgive my rudeness, g-gentlemen, it’s just I’m…”

While quaking all over and weak from shock, hunger, and fatigue, Jamie was pleased to find that calm and focus had fallen over him like a mantle, warming and directing him, guiding his body and his mind. The passing through the stones, the terror of Culloden, the strange frantic pace and sights and sounds of this new time…all of it had fallen away like a snakeskin, discarded, of no further consequence.

He wiped away the tears from his cheek and laughed freely, the first time he could remember doing so since long before Culloden. “It’s just that I’m…verra happy to be going home.”

“Broch Morda, huh?” the mustachioed one asked as they jolted violently over a poor spot of road and—for the dozenth time—Jamie barely suppressed the violent urge to vomit. The speaker seemed barely to notice, continuing on conversationally. “We met a guy the other day who was from that area, actually. Do you know a George Lindsay?”

“I…ken several of that name, to be sure, but they…havena been in the area for some time. I doubt greatly that we should be acquainted.”

“You sure?” the bespectacled one prodded. “Blonde hair? Green eyes?”

“Quite certain, I fear.”

All parties seeming to accept this, an amiable silence fell once more, and Jamie exhaled in relief. So strange was 1950—mind-boggling at every turn—that he feared each word uttered would demonstrate his ignorance and betray him as the unnatural visitor he was. He had tried, in consequence, to say as little as possible without being pointedly rude. This had proved difficult, however, for his new companions—Americans, they said, on a tour of the British Isles—were pleasant folk, and generous to boot.

“The clothes look good on you,” the blonde one at the wheel of the contraption said appreciatively, looking back over the seat at Jamie. “Sorry they’re not all that clean. They’ve been rolling around in the backseat for the last few weeks. Probably smell a bit like weed, too,” he added apologetically.
Going along with their assumption that his “real clothes” had been stolen, Jamie had accepted a pair of long breeks made of some thick, blue material, and a thin, short shirt with sleeves that stopped after the shoulders. His own boots would have to do, though he felt rather ridiculous with the fabric flopping about overtop them, rather than respectably tucked in. Jamie trusted that he would be less conspicuous in this new attire, though to his own eye, he looked a right fool.

“Dinna fash on my account. I’m entirely grateful, and beggars canna expect much in the way of choice,” Jamie said, unscrewing his eyes long enough to meet his companion’s in sincere but admittedly weak thanks. In truth, he was more concerned about the state he would be in himself after rolling about in said back seat long enough to reach Inverness. His wain was churning madly, even empty, from the constant rattling, jolting, and swerving of the metal wagon, which hurtled at impossible speeds through the hills and glens. Van, he corrected himself queasily, gripping the door so tightly his knuckles went bloodless. This horseless wagon of certain death is called a Van. That’s what Ronnie and the others had called it anyway. It was better than traveling by boat, he thought with a grimace, but not by much.

The gripping in his belly was not only due to the terrorizing conveyance, but also to his anxiousness to reach Inverness. In the town, surely he would be able to find food, and perhaps a way to earn some money before heading south. He had no idea how much a horse would cost in 1950, let alone a Van, even if he were able to learn to ride one of the blasted things. He would go on foot if nothing else, just as soon as he got his bearings.

He was aware of the strange surroundings, to be sure, as the party rattled into Inverness. How could one ignore them? The buildings were tall—huge—and the streets visible through the windows were packed with more Vans, big and small, all moving about en masse like a swarm of insects. He’d jumped in terror at sound of a great roar from the heavens, to be told that it was only an airplane. Oh aye, he’d considered replying, staring up at the tiny thing and waiting for his heartbeat to slow again. *Only* a vessel that carries folk up into the clouds ready to plummet them to their deaths.

But the wonders and frights of 1950 seemed, ultimately, of little consequence. Like rain or cold or hunger, they were inconvenient, and took some getting used to, but were nothing to take account of in relation to a task that needed doing. He would accustom himself to this world as best he might, as much as was necessary, in order to reach her.

God, the thought made his heart squeeze with joy. Claire and wee Brian. No longer to be confined to his dreams and prayers, accompanied by despair and longing, but held tight in his very arms, pressed against his heart. Soon, he would feel and smell and hear them against his body; his blood and bone, his soul restored to him once more.

“How?”

Jamie blinked, coming out of his reverie. “Aye? S-sorry, what?”

“We’re here, man.”

Sure enough, thank the Lord, the infernal rattling had ceased. Jamie stumbled out onto the smooth stone road in front of a row of shops. He stretched and inhaled deeply, enjoying the feel of the sun on his face and smiling widely.

*Catching the child up and spinning him round. Hearing him giggle. Hearing wee Brian call him “Da.”*

“Will you come in for a bite before you head off, Alex?” Ronnie asked, clapping him jovially on the back. “Our treat!”
Jamie opened his mouth to say that he certainly would and thank you very kindly. He was starving, after all. But before he could speak, something coming up the road toward them caught his eye… and froze him to the bone.

A man and a woman, pushing a small wheeled carriage. A tiny bairn lay in it, Jamie could see. The wee thing began to wail, and the mother stopped, but the father uttered a gentle word to stop her, and reached in to pick up the wee one himself. The man was wearing a dark hat and coat with matching trousers. A strange costume to Jamie’s eyes but striking, nonetheless. The father raised the child to his shoulder and kissed it tenderly on its capped head, rocking it slowly as the mother looked on in tenderness. He leaned his head against the bairn’s and returned it, taking her hand in his.

Jamie barely even heard the shouts of his companions as he ran. Ran until his feet ached. Ran down streets. 1950 was now a terrifying and never-ending labyrinth, violent and pernicious, and he jumped in panic at every new danger. The Vans shrieked and squealed as he ran across more streets than he could count. The whole place seemed to pulse and roar as he tried to outrun the voice in his ear.

You canna, it said, over and over.

I can, damn it, and I will, he snarled back each time.

You can, it always conceded…but you mustn’t.

The face of Black Jack Randall loomed under a dark hat. He was there, in a dark coat and trousers, his arms around a tiny red-haired lad, smiling down with genuine tenderness, kissing him, spinning him around….Then the scene shifted, and wee Brian was crying, wailing in the fiend’s arms, struggling to get free of the vice-like grip, looking up in terror as his captor leered down and—

Jamie awoke with a cry of anguished fury, reaching for a dirk that wasn’t there. He was on the ground in a small passage between two looming buildings. Rubbish of all kinds was piled everywhere. It was freezing, just after dawn, but he was heaving with boiling sweat.

“I must,” he gasped, shaking with rage. “God as my witness, I must!

No, said the voice. You mustn’t.

His cry was silenced by a sudden tolling cutting through the hazy early-morning light. Church bells. He uttered earnest thanks to heaven. A sound that was known to him. A promise of a place of peace and sanctuary. Scarcely taking note of his surroundings, he followed to the sound, drawn to it, clinging to it as he ran.

He reached the small stone church just as the sun was nosing up in the east, illuminating the broad wooden doors. Without even stopping to knock, he pushed one open and entered. It was a small place: two columns of pews pointing toward a simple altar; but quiet and still. He threw himself into one of the pews. There were no kneeling benches, but he went to his knees nonetheless. He pulled the rosary from his pocket (saved from that of his breeks before they were discarded) and prayed with all his soul.

“Tell me what I must do….Show me.”

You mustn’t.

Jamie flung the rosary behind him, pulled a book from the slot and hurled it, too. He let forth a strangled sob and slammed both hands down on the pew back, cursing aloud, “HOW can that be the answer?”
“Are ye in need of help, sir?”

Jamie started and whirled around to locate the speaker, nearly falling backwards in the space between the pews in the process. A small man was standing at the rear of the church, pulling the door shut with a gentle click. Jamie saw with a pang of guilt that he wore a clerical collar.

He lowered his head, utterly ashamed. “F-forgive me, Father…” He gestured toward the direction of the flung book—Christ, has it been a Holy Bible?—“That was inexcusable, and I shouldna have shouted as I did. Nor was it right of me to—to barge in wi’ out leave and—”

“I’m not a Father, just a simple Presbyterian reverend,” the man interrupted kindly. “And it was right for you to come here. It’s the home of every soul in need, after all; even if what the soul in question needs is a bit of a shout and a rage.”

Jamie couldn’t help but smile at the affable minister. “That’s…verra gracious of ye to say, fa—reverend.”

The man returned the smile. “May I know your name, sir?”

“I’m…” Jamie hesitated for a moment before saying, “I’m kent here as Alexander Malcolm.”

The reverend gestured to the parcel in his hands. “I like to take my breakfast here in the sanctuary of a Sunday. Will you join me in a meal, Mr. Malcolm? Mrs. Graham has prepared quite the spread, and you look as if you could use a bite.”

Jamie—starving—was touched by this kindness, and humbled by being offered food by someone to whom he had just been so rude, however inadvertently. He dipped his head. “Aye. Aye, and I thank ye for it…most sincerely.”

They sat together in the velvet-cushioned pew, the food spread out between them on a towel. Jamie noticed that the reverend portioned out less than a quarter of the food for himself. He opened his mouth to protest, but was silenced with a kind, but firm look. Jamie hoped his own look conveyed his deep thanks just as clearly. It was good, the food. Boiled eggs, sliced sausages, toasted bread, and a kind of sweet cake dotted with currants and swirled with cinnamon. Jamie tried to eat slowly, but with little success. How long had it been since he’d tasted food, let alone food as rich, sweet, and delightful as this? After two years of little more than bannocks, game, and whatever he could forage off the mountain, the tastes made him nearly come to tears.

Jamie washed it down with long swallows from the metal flask, enjoying the intense sweetness of the liquid. The juice of oranges, and cold as a mountain burn? Lord, what a time, he thought, wonderingly, when even a priest can afford such luxurious fare to his breakfast.

“The sexton thinks it a terrible sacrilege,” the reverend was saying, looking around the sanctuary as he finished his own portion, “but I always eat here, instead of in the wee kitchen. It’s peaceful. And I dinna think the Lord would oppose the companionable breaking of bread in his home.”

Jamie passed back the flask, utterly sated. “Aye, it is peaceful. I hoped…” he hesitated. “I hoped it would be…when I heard the bells.”

The reverend looked over sharply for a moment, then back down as he packed the breakfast impedimenta back into the bundle. When he had done, he sat back in the pew, crossing his hands over his chest and looking forward toward the darkened altar.

“I gather that ye find yourself in trouble of some kind, Mr. Malcolm?”
Jamie tensed, feeling the anxious dread settle once more to curdle in his wairn, ‘‘No. No’ in trouble… I find myself in a strange place and without means, to be sure…but that’s nothing I canna handle.’’

‘‘Troubled, then?’’ the man said, softly, after a moment.

You mustn’t.

Jamie winced, then nodded slowly, his voice sounding strained as he answered. ‘‘Aye…I am that, and no mistake.’’

‘‘…Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you,’’ the reverend quoted. ‘‘I’m surely not the Lord, nor the disciple Peter, but if you desire a friend to listen…to share in your burdens for a time….’’

The peaceable offer hung over them. A gift, not a demand. Jamie stared up at the altar. A tapestry of purple and white hung above it. A cross of purple, headed with a burst of sun at the top.

‘‘It’s…my wife,’’ he began, at last, feeling choked. ‘‘She…she believes me dead, and will have for a number of years now.’’

‘‘Ah,’’ said his companion, nodding. ‘‘The war?’’

Jamie nodded, for that was no lie. ‘‘War and…other complications, preventing any communication to her that I had survived. I am only now finding myself at liberty, myself.’’ Jamie lowered his eyes. ‘‘She—that is…She was wi’ child—my child—the last we saw one another, and she has….remarried.’’

The reverend made an mmmm of deep understanding, but didn’t speak or look at Jamie, just waited, allowing him the privacy of not looking him directly in the face.

‘‘I…want to go to her at once,’’ he said, the longing evident in his voice. ‘‘God knows, I want nothing more than to run to her and the child, take them to my heart and never let go.’’ Jamie swallowed, feeling the pain of every word as a knife in his throat. ‘‘For, the honest truth is, reverend, that I’ve no place left in any world, now, save wi’ my wife and child.’’

He sighed, the air rushing out in a frantic rush of despair. ‘‘But would it no’ be wrong of me to simply show up on her doorstep? I would no’ have wanted her to live as a ghost after I was gone. If she’s found happiness with F—with this man as I’d have wanted her to, what right have I to snatch it out from under her again? If she’s already mourned and buried me in her mind…if our child kens him for father….if she’s happy….’’

He trailed off, and the reverend sighed, saying, ‘‘You’re right. It would perhaps be wrong, then. Particularly for sake of the child.’’

Hearing this answer, when he had been secretly longing for reassurance of his own right and prerogative as father and husband, Jamie wanted to fall to the ground in despair.

‘‘But if she isn’t happy…’’ the reverend continued, ‘‘…If she hasn’t moved on, and you choose to stay away from fear…that would be wrong, too, would it not?’’

Another long silence. This time it was Jamie that broke it.

‘‘I thought I should die yesterday eve from the battle of it all in my heart….It—frightens me.’’

‘‘Frightens you how, Mr. Malcolm?’’
The words came tumbling out of him. “Just that…almost always, there’s right and wrong in my head that guides my choices. While one may be easier or more costly, rare is the time that it isna clear what ought to be my path, whether from honor, duty, righteousness, or for the good of one that I love. It’s no’ easy, but it’s simple. This time, though…these paths…” He put his face in his hands, “I truly dinna ken what I’m to do.”

The sun must have been truly up by this time. A beam of light suddenly illuminated the altar. The bronze candlesticks gleamed like gold.

“I believe your decision revolves around a pivotal question.” The reverend leaned forward to rest his forearms on the pew. “Is her happiness truly of more importance than your own?”

“It is,” Jamie said at once. “Hers and the child’s.”

“Even if…it is without you?”

“Aye,” he gasped out, tears gathering in his eyes, but with no hesitation. He had meant it when he sent her through the stones, and he meant it now. Though it should tear him apart with despair, that was his bond and the truth of his soul.

“Well, then, while you have not asked my advice outright, I will give it to you nonetheless.” The reverend turned in the pew to face Jamie directly, now. “I think you must contrive a way to determine her happiness from a distance. Learn how she fares without approaching her. If carefully done, you will learn what you need to without her even knowing. And based on what you learn…then decide what is to be your path.”

Jamie swallowed. “Ye speak wisely. It’s a good plan. Something between all…and nothing.” He rocked forward in his seat, trying vainly to resist the shameful words trying to fight free of his mouth. “But I’m afraid, reverend; afraid of what I shall do if I see them. Afraid that I’ll forget all honor and promises and…”

Jamie broke off with a sob, laying his head on his folded arms like a child. The thought of seeing Claire and not going to her. Not touching her. Not holding her close and weeping into her hair, swearing never to leave her side. Of seeing wee Brian from afar and allowing him to pass by. Of never holding his son. Of seeing the man who the boy calls ‘father.’

The reverend laid a gentle hand on Jamie’s hunched shoulder. “The Lord prayed in Gethsemane for the cup to be taken from him…but he knew what had to be done for the sake of those he called beloved, even unto death on a cross.”

“That’s the verra thing, reverend,” Jamie said, so low the man had to lean in closer to hear. “I would die for them, today. I already tried to; and I’d die a thousand times more, to see them safe and well. But to live,” his voice shook violently on the word, “live wi’out them…to go on forever alone, knowing they are within my reach…”

The reverend reached into his pocket and pulled out Jamie’s discarded rosary, laying it in his hand. “Pray. Always. If this is to be your cross…He will help you bear it. No matter the outcome.”
Jamie sat tensed in the seat of the Train, trying not to compare the movement to that of a ship, rocking slowly back and forth. It would be a damnably long ride, the passenger next to him had said. Had he been in less of a state of agitation, Jamie would have laughed aloud. *Less than a day to travel nigh on the full length of Scotland and England? That was a damnably great miracle, to his mind.*

*The kind reverend had rained gifts on Jamie that morning. A hot bath at a nearby hotel (Claire was right, it was heavenly); a featherlight razor with which to shave; a fresh set of clean clothes; a letter of reference and introduction should he seek employment in future; a basket of food; and money enough for rail passage anywhere in England or Scotland, and some besides. At this last, Jamie had tried to refuse, offering to stay on for as long as need be to earn the lavish sum.*

*However, the reverend had closed Jamie’s fingers firmly around the envelope. “We all are granted grace at pivotal times in our lives, Mr. Malcolm,” he had said. “Let this be a day of grace for you; for sake of your family.”*

Jamie sat now, still as a stone, listening as each station was called. Jamie knew next to nothing of how to navigate the cadences and flows of 1950: how business was done; how honor was determined; how information was passed and learned; Christ, he scarcely could manage crossing the streets, crowded as they always were with the screeching machines. But navigate them he would, whatever the cost, to learn of Claire and the child. There was only one place in the world Jamie knew to begin.

*The department of history at Oxford University.*
Chapter 3

Oxford
Three weeks later

Claire.

Sorcha. His light.

Dressed in some soft color…pink, was it? He didn’t think he’d ever seen her in such a shade. She glowed in it, and of herself, bathed all around in sunlight.

She was pushing wee Brian on a swing, the both of them laughing.

She looked up suddenly, as if drawn to him by some heavenly force, meeting his eye, recognition sparkling in her own. Her lips parted and—

“Malcolm? Will you come here a moment, please?”

Jamie came to himself and leaned his shovel against a nearby tree, blinking away the dream that had haunted him each night these last few weeks.

Each time the ending was different.

Some nights she gasped and ran to him, flinging herself into his arms, brimming with laughter and tears of joy.

Some nights she crumpled to the ground, and it was he who came to her, gathering her to him, lifting her chin up to whisper, “I’m here, mo chridhe…I willna ever leave ye,” before kissing her, soft at first, then deeply.

But on other nights…most nights…the look in her eye wasn’t one of delight. It was horror. Sorrow. Guilt. Decision. “I’m sorry,” the look said, “I’m so, so sorry… I can’t.”

He shuddered with dread of it, and stooped to retrieve the canteen from the ground, taking a long swallow and wiping the sweat from his brow as he walked across the courtyard to answer the summons of his employer.
“Whatever your destination,” the reverend had said, bidding him farewell at the steps as worshippers processed up them for the morning’s services, “seek out the Church. There will always be kind hearts there, ready to assist you in time of need.”

This he had done as soon as soon as the Train had arrived in Oxford. Good fortune had led him to a parish hall that offered food and shelter to men down on their luck. It was a simple place, equipped with just a few cots, a small kitchen, and a room where one might bathe, but the parishioners who had the running of it were very kind, and Jamie was eternally grateful not to be sleeping on the streets, plaid-less as he was, and with no soft banks of heather to be had. Most of the residents appeared in far worse straits than he, he noted, most of them struggling with the ravages of drink and other horrors. Every day he dropped a coin in the mercy box, that some poor soul after him might find respite here, and receive the same kind hospitality shown to one and all.

In addition to seeing to his basic needs, his hosts also helped him better adapt to the ways of 1950. He managed to explain most of his “odd” behavior—such as a tendency to gawk wide-eyed at the breathtaking luxuries and contraptions available to the commonest man—by telling folk he had been raised on a remote Scottish isle, far from cities, TeleVisions, Vans, and such things. The British, he noted darkly, were all too ready—though usually without malice—to accept his being Scottish (island dweller or no) as a perfectly reasonable explanation for his knowing so little of how Things were done.

One of the layworkers, a round, apple-cheeked woman who helped serve breakfast of a morning, had suggested—blushing furiously, blessings on her gentle heart—that he needn’t call her Mistress, nor bow to the women at every sighting. “As flattering as it is, Mr. Malcolm, such over-the-top gallantry does sometimes make ladies’ feel somewhat uncomfortable….as if you might be seeking certain over-friendly attentions from them, do you see?”

On another occasion, emboldened by Jamie’s genuinely grateful acceptance of this advice, she had advised that he might take to bathing at the end of a day; every day, she had said firmly. Very unnecessary, this seemed to Jamie; but hot water and soap was seemingly in endless abundance, and he couldn’t deny the pleasure of regular cleanliness. No wonder Claire always prattled on about it, he had thought with a pang on more than one occasion, running his fingers through the silky smoothness of his hair.

That very hair had been forced to adapt to 1950 as well. Another helpful Volunteer, a barber by day, he said—a term which apparently had shifted over time to signify someone who tends to a person’s locks—had cropped it to a more “respectable” length, showing Jamie how to part it with a comb and smooth the lot back with pomade. Jamie had resisted the latter at first, though he had submitted meekly enough to the shearing. I already look enough like a newborn bairn, he’d thought, wi’ my locks not even reaching my ears; slicking the sticky stuff overtrop completed the natal effect far too closely for his taste. Aye, he confirmed, observing the completed effect in a mirror, a hatchling popinjay still wet from the egg.

He had to admit, though, that the style did make him more closely resemble the gentlemen he saw passing on the street in the fine Suits and hats. Jamie could not yet conscience incurring the expense of such clothing for himself; but in his dreams of meeting Claire again, he always swept off such a dark hat from his head in order to properly kiss her. Would she like to see him, thus, dressed in the garments of her own time? He always brushed such thoughts away at once. Ye are no’ here to see
her again, man, only to learn of her well-being; hers and the child’s. Still…dreams came as they would, regardless of more noble intentions.

Every day, it seemed, brought a new challenge to which he must adapt; a new faux-pas of which he was not aware. He had an entirely new appreciation for Claire’s successful assimilation into his own time. Which was more difficult, he wondered: a person of the eighteenth century adapting to the twentieth, or the reverse? He wasn’t entirely sure. In many ways, 1950’s was a far more informal society. Young women might go about unchaperoned in public places with young men (drinking beverages together at the table in eating houses); skirts were certainly shorter; and there seemed a far less stark contrast between the low-born and the well-to-do. In others, however, it was far more complicated and demanding, at least compared with the simple ways of the highlands. The expectations here regarding proper dress, for instance, were apparently very important to going about in polite society. The shocking profusion of shops catering to ever-changing styles of dress (one was expected to buy new clothes with every season, it seemed); the rules regarding what could and could not be worn after 6:00 pm; the very idea that one was expected to know if it was 6:00 pm at any given moment by carrying a timepiece on one’s body! Such things sometimes made 1950 feel to Jamie more like the court of Versailles, governed by a detailed code, the knowledge of which was both sacrosanct and shockingly difficult to come by, a system designed to separate the grain from the chaff.

Generally, however, he didn’t fash over such things. He learned eagerly about the new contraptions that could aid him (the large Vans called OmniBuses were particularly useful for getting about), and simply ignored those that could not. If folk gave him odd looks in the street, so be it. If he sounded an ignorant fool from time to time, so be it. He worked, he ate, he slept, and he waited.

Anything else, unless it helped him find Claire, was simply of no importance.

Jamie drew up level with his superior and tipped his uniform cap smartly. “Willya be needing something, then, Mr. Pierce?”

Mr. Pierce was a full head shorter than Jamie, but a hardy sort, accustomed to the out-of-doors in a way that Jamie both respected greatly and found remarkably rare in this time. Pierce had, in fact, been the one that discovered Jamie wandering about the university grounds some weeks ago. Jamie had seen the man struggling with a heavy crate, and had hastened to assist. In return, exceedingly grateful, the man had offered him a temporary position while his assistant groundskeeper was on extended holiday (“for nerves,” Pierce had said, confidentially). Thanks to the reverend’s letter of general reference and Pierce’s good word, Jamie had managed to secure the position, after passing through the gauntlet of forms to fill out, PhotoGraphs to be taken (miraculous it was, to see his own likeness so precisely rendered), and uniform (Kit) of which to take custody. Jamie greatly enjoyed the
work of trimming hedges, hauling, planting, lifting, and such like around the many colleges of Oxford, relishing the sensation of being useful and strong once more. It was likewise more satisfying than he ever would have imagined to be able to purchase food from the wee shops with his own wages; no small feat in this new world completely devoid of both game and proper weapons.

Pierce held up the small flat of flowers, squinting up at Jamie in the late-afternoon sun. “I hate to ask this of you so near the end of your shift, Malcolm, but would you be so kind as to drop these in front of Professor Dornish’s office? She phoned to say she’s headed home now, but wants some fresh blooms for her window boxes, and wishes to plant them first thing in the morning.”

Jamie felt a small glow of pride in finding that he understood each word without having to ask for more explanation. Shift: the span in which one is expected to work. Phoned: sent a message using the TelePhone. His knowledge of Greek and Latin were of great help in deciphering the modern names, he found. Tele: far; Phone: sound. A sound from from away, easy enough. If only they weren’t so inclined to shorten the damn words, he would make out far quicker, he mused, not for the first time.

Jamie took the proffered flat of pansies from Mr. Pierce. “Gladly, sir. In which building might I find Professor Dornish?”

“Atchison Hall, third floor.”

Atchison. Had he blushed? Or blanched? Surely Pierce could see some evidence of the violence that had just erupted within Jamie at the word. Evidently not, though, for the man was already walking in the opposite direction, shouting cheerfully over his shoulder. “Thank you kindly, Malcolm; a great help to be sure!”

Atchison Hall, Jamie repeated over in his mind, walking mindlessly. Department of History.

While Jamie had confirmed on his second day in Oxford that a Frank Randall was, in fact, presently employed at the university, he had as yet been too skittish to actually ask about the place concerning the man. Jamie was ashamed of himself for it, truth be told. It was unlike him to shy away from a task; but shy he had, secretly terrified of what he might learn about Randall, good or ill. Tomorrow, he kept telling himself, I shall begin to make the inquiries to learn of his character, how Mrs. Randall and any children of theirs might fare. Then, tomorrow again, when the new day came.

Now, circumstance was pushing him into action, and more direct action than he would ever have contemplated. He hadn’t dreamed of actually entering the man’s domain. Courage, he chided himself as he climbed the stairs of Atchison Hall, the man surely will have left for the day, late as it is.

Jamie read the name cards on the closed doors, looking for Dornish. Nothing on the first wing. He tried the second. Lillywhite… Holmes… Ryland…

Dr. Frank W. Randall.

Christ.

Jamie took a step closer, as if to read a deeper meaning in the engraved letters. He traced them with a finger. Here he was, then; the wee shite that—

All at once, the brass plate flew toward him along with the rest of the extremely heavy wooden door, smacking him in the forehead and knocking him backward onto the ground. He groaned and clutched his head.

A sound of distress came from the other side of the door and a man’s feet stepped into Jamie’s view. “Good Lord, I’m terribly sorry, sir!” said the voice in a clipped, scholarly accent, deeply apologetic.
The man crouched before him. “How clumsy of me, I had no idea—”

Jamie jumped, and had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from crying out at the sight of Black Jack Randall, a dark coat and hat over his arm, leering into his face.

_No, not leering at all_, Jamie corrected himself after the initial shock, taking deep breaths to steady himself, _merely looking down in kind concern_. And not Jack Randall.

“Are you alright sir?” the man was saying, reaching out a hand to help Jamie up. “Are you hurt?”

Jamie jerked back violently from the proffered hand—_not even in hell would he let a Randall lay hands on him again_, he vowed—but scrambled to his feet nonetheless, trying to regain some semblance of composure. “Oh…no…no’ hurt, just st-startled, is all…thank you kindly,” he managed.

Randall’s expression brightened. “Scots, eh? One of my specialities, Scotland! What part of the country, if I might ask?”

“Oh, oh—ah—” Jamie scrambled for a moment, distracted as he was by the sight of the man’s gold wedding ring, _damn his goddamn_—“A tiny wee island off the coast of the northernmost highlands. Dinna think ye’d ken it,” Jamie said. Eager for distraction from the idea of this man repeatedly bedding his wife, Jamie stooped to pick up the battered pansies.

Randall smiled, “You might be surprised; I’ve made a career of the place. In any case,” he said, gesturing to the office, “won’t you come in and join me for a drink? A small recompense for clobbering you in the head.”

Jamie’s wairm began churning even more madly with anxiety. He could feel a cool sweat breaking out across his brow. “Oh I couldnna—I’ve got to deliver these to Professor Dornish’s office, and—”

“Oh, what luck, just one door down! _Here_.” He took the flat firmly from Jamie’s hands and set it down next to the neighboring door. “All sorted. Now, how about that drink?”

“It’s—it’s verra kind of ye,” Jamie stammered, inching toward the stairwell, “t-to be sure, but—”

“I _must_ insist,” he said, looking up into Jamie’s face with eagerness. “Please join me, Mr…?”

_This is what ye wanted. To find him, so you might find out about them. This is your chance. Go, damn you._

“M-Malcolm,” Jamie said, reflexively making a leg and stammering, “Alexander Malcolm, at—at your service, sir.”

Randall gave a small laugh, replying with a cordial, “Frank Randall,” accompanied by a slightly whimsical but in no way mocking bow of his own. “At yours and your family’s, to be sure.”

_The man crouched before him. “How clumsy of me, I had no idea—”_
pour two glasses from a crystal decanter. “Do they still use such archaic phrases in the highlands? It’s charming to be sure,” he said, smiling warmly, as he gestured Jamie to a pair of brown leather armchairs by the window.

“Oh…j-just in certain parts,” Jamie mumbled absently. He couldn’t stop looking sidelong at the man’s face as he seated himself. No, not as like Black Jack as he’d first thought…but the resemblance was clearly there. The same thin build of him. The same color of his eyes and level to his brow. Aye, a remarkable resemblance. Enough that the thought of him daring to lay hands on the child made Jamie’s stomach turn violently, unjust as the rage might be. Claire had loved this man...might love him again, now...

“So, what brings a Highlander all the way down to Oxfordshire, Mr. Malcolm?” Randall asked, handing a glass to Jamie and settling into the second armchair.

“Just…passing through. Took a temporary placement here wi’ the groundskeeper while I…sort out my next step.” Jamie accepted the glass and sniffed experimentally. Whiskey. Good whiskey. He swallowed half of it in one gulp, his hands shaking badly. Lord, give me strength.

“Ah, yes, Pierce; good chap. Well, it’s a lovely time of year for it,” the man said, eyes kind and friendly as he sipped his own glass. “I’ve always loved Oxford in spring. It’s delightful to see all the folk about. Families sometimes bring their children to feed the ducklings.”

Families. A chill suddenly crossed Jamie’s heart. What if they’d had a child? Another child? The thought fell through him like lead. She would never, then, be able to bring herself to...

For the last time, Fraser, that isna why you’re here. Get hold of yourself at once and find a way to begin. Ye only need to know if she’s well or no.

“Do ye live closeby yourself, Mr. Randall?” he said, a little too loudly. He quickly added by way of context, “I’m…in temporary lodgings myself, at present, and would like to get a sense of the areas hereabouts…in case I should ever which to settle permanently.” Weak, but it was a start.

“Oh, yes, quite close,” Randall said affably. “A small apartment near the campus. Though, if you’ve a family, I would recommend Grosvenor. A newer development with quiet streets and plenty of trees. I should like to have a home there myself, but can’t conscience the expense for only myself.”

“For only myself”…?

“But surely ye will be marrit yourself, Mr. Randall?” Jamie blurted, before he could stop himself. The man looked up sharply at that, and Jamie felt his wain clench in anxiety. “It’s… only I saw your ring, and…and assumed that…” He trailed off lamely, but his blood was pounding fast. Surely the man had simply misspoken.

“Oh…” Randall looked down at his hand rather blankly. “Quite, I…” He paused. When he spoke, his tone was steeled, jaw set rigidly. “I was married...but no longer. I wish—but no, she’s—she’s gone. Just haven’t been able to bring myself to take the bloody ring off, to be honest.”

Jamie felt the world shift under his feet, his vision narrow to a single point amid the swelling blackness.

His child raised by another man. His wife, loved—swived—by another man. These things he had envisioned. However abhorrent, these things he had prepared for.

But…erased by the stones…or dead in childbirth…These he had never had allowed himself to contemplate—not even for a moment. The very notion that that one or both of them mightn’t have
survived was….

‘…but no, she’s—she’s gone…’ Randall had said. Was it grief in the man’s voice that made him stumble so over the words?

Jamie clutched the rosary in his pocket. *Please, God. Give me the strength to do this. To bear this.*

He took a staying breath, his voice coming out like a stranger’s. “I didna tell ye my full name, Mr. Randall. My *real* name.”

Randall blinked at the apparent non sequitur. “Oh? Ah, well, I don’t quite…”

“My name…is James Alexander Malcolm Mackenzie Fraser.”

Randall’s face underwent a transformation, from blank confusion, to dawning recognition, followed by unmistakable horror.

Jamie’s gut clenched with the agony of anxiety and dawning hope. “Ye…ye ken who I am, then?”

Randall spoke haltingly, eyes wide and wary. “That name is…known to me, yes.”

Jamie gasped in relief, gripping the arms of the chair. Claire had told Randall of him…She had made it through the stones alive. He felt the weight of it fall from his heart. *Thank you, Lord.*

It was only *one* burden, though…

“But you…” Randall was sitting straight as a rod in his seat, studying him. “She said…that you had…*died*.”

Jamie swallowed. “She had every reason to think so…but I survived, nonetheless. God knows I didna mean to, but….”

“I see.” Randall looked down at the glass in his hand; then raised it to his lips, emptying it. They sat silent for nearly a full minute. Jamie counted the ticks of the clock. Randall stood, then, slowly and walked to the desk, carefully refilling his glass with trembling hands.

**When the sounds of Claire’s screams of agony in the Bois de Boulogne cut through his memory, he could keep patiently silent no more.**

“Is Claire alive?” he choked out.

Randall looked up, searching Jamie’s face carefully, before he took a seat across the room from Jamie on a hard wooden chair against the bookcase. “Yes,” he said at last, very quietly. “She lives.”

Another insuppressible exhale escaped him. *Claire lived.* He dropped his elbows to his knees, relief washing over him so violently that he could no longer be mindful of posture. Gathering tears of relief stung his eyes, though he tried to suppress them, afraid that once he gave in to them, he’d never stop; and he couldn’t yet afford to relinquish himself to joy, for the final weight was perhaps the heaviest, the darkest.

“And…the child…?” he asked, voice cracked and quivering as he looked pleadingly into the man’s face.

Randall squeezed his glass. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then shut it again, clenching his jaw and swallowing hard.
“Please,” Jamie begged, voice choked in a whisper. “My...the child...Did it—” He saw nothing but the sight of Claire’s stone face at Fontainebleau as she described the stillborn child she’d held in her arms.

Please, Lord...Please.


Jamie bent to put his face in his hands and surrendered, breaking apart even as he felt his heart rise like a cask.

They lived. They both lived. A healthy bairn...and a lass. Christ, to think of it...ruddy curls bobbing and wee skirts bouncing about as she trotted across Lallybroch fields behind Claire. His daughter.

Oh, ye did well, mo ghraidh, he murmured silently to Claire, his heart swelling with love and pride and relief.

“It’s real, then?”

Jamie sat up, wiping his eyes to look at Randall. “Real?”

The man was looking back, eyebrows slightly raised. “She...really did travel back...in time...?”

Jamie furrowed his own brow, feeling a rush of disgust, though he tried to keep it from his voice. “Ye thought she was lying to ye, then?”

“I wanted to believe her,” the man snapped defensively, leaning forward in his chair to communicate his urgency, “but—for heaven’s sake, how could one begin to contemplate such a thing? Traveling through a stone back to another century? Bloody hell, to the casual observer, it’s ludicrous, is it not? Flies in the face of every rational thought!” He stopped short, paused, then laughed softly, slumping back and leaning his head slightly against the bookshelves as he raised his glass in ironic salute. “I suppose you believed her at once, then?”

Jamie didn’t hear the question, let alone contemplate an answer, too alarmed by the panic that was growing in his mind as the pieces of their conversation began to fly thick and fast. “What the hell did ye mean, ‘she’s gone?’”

Randall didn’t seem surprised by the question. He raised his glass to his lips, not meeting Jamie’s eye, murmuring the words just before swallowing. “We are...divorced.”

“Divorced?” The word was like a knife in Jamie’s gut. “BASTARD!” He roared to his feet and made for the man, shaking with rage. “Ye didna stand by her? Didna stand by them? What kind of dishonorable, miserable SHITE leaves a woman heavy wi’ child to”—

“I did stand by her!” Randall snarled, rising to his feet just as violently, making Jamie stop short. Despite standing nearly five inches shorter, the man matched the Scot in ferocity, dagger for dagger. “Damn you, I begged her to let me raise the child as my own! Begged her to let me take care of them both—and she agreed, at first.” Randall blinked and a shudder ran through him. “We lived together...had a home...I thought we’d be...but a few months later, she—she left me.”

Jamie took a step back. “Left...?”

Randall let his arms fall to his sides, though the fists remained clenched, voice soft. “Before the child was even born. Said she ‘couldn’t bear it’, and couldn’t ask me to bear it, either. So she left.” His
voice cracked painfully.

Jamie’s pity couldn’t prevent his lip from curling as he spat, “And ye let her?”

Randall’s eyes went dark and dangerous. “You think I had any choice in the matter? That anything I bloody said made a difference to her?” He raised a finger, gesturing wildly. “Weeks and weeks of arguments—angry meetings with solicitors—me on my knees day after day pleading before her wasn’t enough to sway her!”

Jamie made a scoffing sound, at which Randall blazed still higher. “Have YOU ever persuaded her against something she had set her fucking pigheaded mind to?”

“Aye! I HAVE!” Jamie raged, wanting to tear the man limb from limb where he stood. “She wanted—begged—to stay and die wi’ me instead of coming back but I made her go. I MADE her promise to come back to YOU, and she did so, did she not?”

That brought Randall up short. He looked blank for a moment, then laughed, a soft, empty sound to Jamie’s ears in the wake of their joint fury. “I suppose love is enough to persuade Claire…whereas the absence of it…” He made strangled sound deep in his throat and turned away from Jamie, scrubbing one hand over his face and leaning against the shelf with the other.

With a deep exhale, Jamie retreated to stand beside one the leather chairs, marshaling his emotions, trying manfully to temper his rage with compassion. Canna blame the man for hurting.

He unclenched his hands and made an effort to soften his features, breathing deeply. Randall tried to care for them; wanted to protect them. He’ll tell ye what ye need to know, in the end; just be gentle about it, aye?

“Does Claire bide here in Oxfordshire, Mr. Randall?” he asked, very softly, barely controlling the rise of both unbearable impatience and unspeakable joy. Wherever she was, Claire was no longer tied to Randall…she was free…Jamie could go to her with no fear…as her husband. It was more than he’d dared hope.

Randall’s head came up at that, and he turned to look over his shoulder at Jamie, eyes filled with a kind of hostile bemusement. “And just what makes you think I would I do a damn thing to help you?”

That took Jamie aback. “Because…she is my wife,” he said, startled into simple matter-of-fact.

“How dare you,” he hissed, “I owe you nothing….In fact, you are greatly in my debt for stealing my wife from me for three fucking years.”

Randall sneered. “Och, aye,” Randall slurred in gross mimic as he picked up his glass again and took a deep swallow. “Ye’ve said yourself that she isna your wife any longer; and she’s the mother of my child, Mr. Randall,” Jamie said with marshaled calm. “That you canna deny, no matter what else remains to be settled between you and me, aye?”

“Och, aye,” Randall sneered. “You would have just turned around, just like that, and walked
“Aye, I would, for I wouldna ask her to leave a happy life for me.” Jamie twitched his shoulders in unease, gritting his teeth in maximum restraint, though his voice was unmistakably rising in volume and intensity. “But if ye suppose that having learned that Claire and my child are out there, somewhere, alone, wi’ no one to protect them, I shall be walking out o’ this room now wi’out knowing where I might find them—"

“Do you know what it’s like?” Randall spat, his eyes burning with intense hatred, looking more like Black Jack every moment. “What it’s fucking like to be deemed less desirable—twice, mind you—than a two hundred year old ghost?” He was nearly crying, Jamie thought, from the sound of his voice. He made a flailing gesture of hopelessness with his arms, sloshing whisky onto the carpeting. “To—reach out to her, to try to comfort her, to desperately work to reach through to her…and feel her flinch? To bring up a time when she had been happy with you and see nothing but deadness in her eyes? To have her restored to you after being rip—ripped away—and then have her rip herself from you once again because you’re not—not goddamn Jamie fucking Christ Almighty Fraser?” He swore and threw his glass violently against the closed door.

“No. I dinna ken what that’s like,” Jamie growled back through gritted teeth, gripping the back of the armchair, torn between true pity for the man and an equally genuine desire to bash his face in. “But I do ken what it is to have her no’ be able to erase the other husband from her mind. To see the other ring and resent her for wearing it; for not being able to forget the bastard who had her before. And I ken what it is to have her inability to forget come at great cost... nigh unbearable cost.”

His throat tightened painfully at this last. Randall heard the tone and looked up in skeptical surprise. “Cost? To you?”

“Aye; and to Claire. She didna tell ye about Paris, then?”

The man’s face twitched, as if the question rankled him, but he only shook his head.

“She chose me, aye. I canna deny it.” Jamie slowly lowered himself back onto the chair. “Claire chose me...but she never forgot you. She always had ye in the back of her mind, guiding her choices.”

“Guiding…? How so?” There was a spark in the man’s voice, though he still held himself rigidly, as if keeping himself from lunging.

“She told ye about meeting Bl—your ancestor, aye?” At Randall’s nod, Jamie continued, ignoring the wave of panic that had fallen over him. “She wouldna risk the possibility that her actions might mean that Frank W. Randall would never be born. Said over again that ye were innocent in all of it, and didna deserve to have your life erased.”

Jamie looked up and met Randall’s eye. “I was for letting ye hang, myself, but Claire wouldna budge. Consequently, certain choices were made to ensure ye werena harmed, and…” Jamie took a deep breath, closing his eyes, “and…we lost our first child as a result. Another wee lass.” His voice cracked painfully and he had to stop to swallow and regain his composure.

Randall studied Jamie for a long moment, then looked down, almost abashed. “I’m…” he began slowly, “I’m very…very saddened to hear that.” He meant it.

God, he really did love her, Jamie thought, seeing the man’s expression of deep pain at thought of Claire’s suffering, if not Jamie’s. Jamie’s heart stirred, producing enough pity to prompt him to add, “As much as I hated it…Claire’s love for ye didna die, man…not ever…not even then.”
“…Thank you.” It was said in such a small voice that Jamie barely heard it.

Deciding to press his advantage, Jamie rose cautiously to his feet. “I’m sorry for the pain I’ve caused ye, Mr. Randall. Truly, I am, and for that which she’s caused you, as well.” Randall’s eyes spoke of all this pain, and more. “If it is any consolation…I do believe ye to be a good man. The only reason I sent her away was because I knew—I trusted—that despite it all, you would be honorable enough to care for them. And ye were. Ye wanted to do right by them, and I’m forever grateful for it.”

Randall didn’t speak. Jamie abandoned all pride and went to his knees before the man, shaking in limb and in voice. “But please…I beg you…tell me where to find my wife and daughter. Please…please….Frank.”

Randall stood looking down. Jamie thought he saw a shift in his gaze; a moment of decision. Then, he suddenly stiffened. “Show me the scars,” he said.

“What?” Jamie gaped open-mouthed. This was the very last thing he could have expected the man to say.

Randall made a small sound of impatience. “The whip marks on your back,” he said, clipped irritability clear in his voice. “Show me.” Not waiting for an answer, Randall stepped behind Jamie and began tugging at the shirt.

Everything broke, then.

In a moment, Jamie had flung the man to the ground. The throat convulsed madly beneath Jamie’s hands, trying to speak; but Jamie couldn’t hear a word, could see nothing but the walls of Wentworth Prison and the face of Randall, the feel of the monster’s hands on his back, on his thighs, his—

Jamie pummeled Randall, over and over and over, suppressing the words that tried to escape the man’s throat until with a flash and burst of pain, all went black.

He awoke in a dark, silent cell, moonlight casting the shadows of the iron bars from the tiny window.

No one answered his shouted pleas.

Despair covered him like a shroud through the night. The Claire in the pink dress, the lad in the swing…they were behind bars, now…and he had put them there

You’ve lost her, now. You.
As much as I would LOVE to say I had followed some Gabaldonian urge to research exactly what buildings and professors the Oxford history department would have had in 1950, or what would have been the desirable neighborhoods around the university at that time, the ones used here are entirely fictional. #lazy
Have you ever passed the corner of Fourth and Grand?

Where a little ball o’ rhythm has a shoe-shine stand?

It was by far the most luxurious prison cell Jamie had ever been kept in. There was a cot, pillow, and blanket; a Toilet of his own; he wasn’t beaten or harassed; and he was fed (quite well) twice each day. It was quiet, none of the horrific moaning and screaming of the Bastille; there were no other prisoners on this particular hall, in fact, so the place was almost deathly quiet. He could sometimes hear music drifting down the corridor, though. The songs were passing strange, and he held no notion whatsoever of why musicians would be brought to play in a prison in the first place. Nonetheless, it undoubtedly helped to pass the dragging hours. The melodies were lost on him, of course, but he enjoyed the riddle of trying to decipher what might possibly be the point of composing nonsense like:

He pops the boogie woogie rag

The Chattanoogie shoe-shine boy.

Still, prison it was, and he had no one to blame for his being there, save himself.

He’d known—known, damn it—that it was Frank Randall who had touched him so suddenly, and that the man meant him no real harm.

Christ, why, though? Why had the bastard made to touch him so? Why the damned scars?

He had speculated on this long and hard in the nights since, for what else had he to occupy his mind? He had concluded that perhaps Frank had felt some Thomas-like desire to see physical proof of this "ludicrous" reality before accepting it...before relinquishing his wife to it. It seemed as good an explanation as any, for Jamie had been certain the man had been just about to relent, to tell Jamie where to find them. Maybe so...maybe not. And even if Jamie were not correct, the man had certainly been very, very drunk, which would have done nothing to quell irrational outbursts such as that.

Regardless of the motivation of that ill-advised action, when the fabric of Jamie's shirt had been so unexpectedly hauled upward, exposing him, Jamie's mind and soul and body had reacted as though he were back in Wentworth once more, ready to kill the miserable fiend this time. Christ, had he? Had he killed Randall? His memories of the moments after he had lost control were vague, drunken almost, lost in a cloud of rage; but he remembered Randall scrabbling vainly to get Jamie’s hands free of his neck; and blood…a lot of it.

Immediately upon gaining consciousness, Jamie had shouted at the top of his lungs. It was hours later that the guard appeared.

“Who?” the acerbic gentleman had barked, glowering irritably at Jamie for having disturbed what had apparently been an exceptionally important nap.

“Randall—Frank Randall. The man I—attacked.”
“Professor type? Mucked up in the face?”

Jamie breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn’t killed Randall on the floor of the office, then. “Aye, that’s him. He was here, then?”

“Only at first—when you were still knocked out,” the guard had said, scratching his belly. “Bloke had a big bandage round his head and covering one eye. Think he’d only just got out of hospital. Just stood looking at you for a while...then he left,” the man finished with a dispassionate shrug, flicking crumbs off his shirtfront.

Jamie gripped the bars tight, demanding urgently, “And? Where is he now? Will he return?”

The guard was already waddling back to his comfortable chair down the corridor. “I’m not the man’s secretary.”

“What’s to become of me?” Jamie had shouted after him, voice rising in mounting panic as the man disappeared around the corner

“Stay here until someone says otherwise, I reckon,” came the lazy reply.

He’d been allowed one Telephone call. He’d stared at the thing for a good minute, having no concept of where to begin to operate the contraption. Seeing his distress, his minder had rolled his eyes and shown him how to reach the operator. The tinny voice that came through the thing had startled Jamie so much, that he nearly dropped it. “Jonas Pierce,” he had wheezed tentatively in response to her query. Then, a tolling sound, repeating on and on, but no answer. He hadn’t been allowed to brave the thing again. Christ, who else would there be to come looking for Alexander Malcolm, the lone Scot who said little and kept to himself?

Jamie didn’t have any notion of how justice was dispensed in this time. How long he would be detained for committing such a vicious act of violence? Days? Months? Years? A Dhia, hadn’t Claire said that Frank had worked closely with the British government during the war? God knew he already had the proper motivation (twice or thrice over) to see Jamie kept locked up away from Claire for the rest of his life. If Randall also had the means and connections with the proper authorities to see the thing done…

He’d tried to escape; tried to push past the guard while being chaperoned back from the bathing facilities, desperately seeking a door or a rampart over which to jump, or—

“It’s stunts like that buy you more time in this place, you know,” the sour-faced guard had panted hotly, as he and three others pinned Jamie to the ground, pressing his face against the cold floor while they clapped the wee feather-light irons on his wrists to quell his struggles. “This’ll go in your file and they’ll keep you in double your time, for sure.”

And so, he’d sat silent and still for days. Staring at the walls. Staring at the ceiling. Praying desperately for the oblivion promised in a large dram of whisky that wouldn’t materialize. He was not a man inclined to drink from despair, for it fuddled the senses at a time when one needed to think clearly in order to light upon solutions, plans…but there was no solution for this predicament. Sleep. That was the only escape.

Sleep eluded him on this night, though (the seventh? Eighth?). No moonlight cut its way through the tiny window, but he lay in his cot awake and alert as though in broad daylight. He tried to think of simple things. Ants crawling across the floor. The unidentified whoosh of something in the walls of the building. The distant sound of Van horns from outside the window.
The blast of music that blared suddenly down the hall made Jamie jump in alarm to sit up in his cot and mutter “Ifrinn!” Why in God’s name would they be performing at this hour?

He was about to lay back down, put the pillow over his ears, and attempt to drown out the noise, but something made him stop. The music was no more than usual, a mere noisome buzzing to his ears...but something was different about the words of this song. For the first time, he could completely understand them—all of them—though they were sung in French.

Le ciel bleu sur nous peut s’effondrer

Et la terre peut bien s’écrouler,

[The blue sky could fall down on us
And the ground could even cave in.]

Not very cheerful, this one, he thought, but what a relief to be able to comprehend—

He felt as though his wain had dropped out of him when he heard the next words.

Peu m’importe si tu m’aimes,

[but little matters to me if you love me,]

A love song.

He was pressing his face against the bars, trying to get closer to the source of the song that was making him ache, body and soul.

“If ye love me, Claire...” he gasped out.

Je me fous du monde entier.

[I’d defy the whole world]

His hands came up to cover his mouth as the fierce passion of chanteuse’s strangely guttural words smote him, one after the other. He slid slowly to the cell floor, small, pitiful sounds of longing escaping as he began to fracture from grief and need of her.

Tant que l’amour inondera mes matins

[As long as love will flood my mornings]

Countless mornings. Countless sun-soaked mornings, flooded with light and love. Rays of sun cutting through an open window, pointing the way to his heart where she lay naked and ready and perfect before him, laughing with that gleam in her eye that made him want to have her and gentle her and protect her all at once. Always.

Tant que mon corps frémira sous tes mains,

[As long as my body will tremble under your hands]

His body, trembling under Claire’s hands; aching with need, with tenderness, with love. Hers, beauty itself, warm and lithe, shuddering beneath his; rising to him, falling with him, seeking and finding.
“No more,” he sobbed to the chanteuse as he trembled against the bars. “Christ, no more.”

But his greedy heart ignored his lips, grabbing for the words like manna, though he thought he would cleave in two from the hearing.

*Peu m’importent les problèmes,*

*Mon amour puisque tu m’aimes.*

[Any problems that come will make little difference to me,*

*My love, since you love me]*

He fell asleep on the ground clutching her to his chest and weeping into her hair.

The door squealed violently on its hinges, and a booted foot kicked Jamie in the ribs. “Oy, you. Get up.”

“Wha—?”

“You’re being let out.”

Jamie was dazed from the startlement of being so suddenly awakened from a poor night’s sleep. “Released, ye mean?” he rasped, realization slowly dawning.

The man gave him a glare. “You want to get out of here, or would you prefer to stay here arseing over my vocabulary?”

“No!” Jamie said at once, staggering to his feet. “No, I’ll go.”

The man led him down a gleaming white corridor, and out into a room flooded with bright Electric light. The music was loud; the source was close, though he could see no players nor singers, French or otherwise.

“Very well, Mr. Malcolm,” the young woman behind the desk said. “Charges have been dropped, and all looks to be in order. You’re free to go.”

He changed back into his own clothes, signed the papers the placed before him, had his PhotoGraph taken again, and followed their instructions nervously, practically quivering from anticipation and from the fear that this was all a terrible, tantalizing dream about to end.

Just as he was about to be ushered out into the street, the woman’s voice piped up across the room after him. “Oh! Oh, wait just a moment please!” She came toward him with a parcel in hand. “This was left for you. It wasn’t signed, but here you are. Best of luck to you, sir.”

Bewildered, Jamie took it. Once outside, he crossed the unfamiliar street—damned if he knew what part of the city he was in—and found a vacant bench. Carefully, he broke open the paper parcel—a large envelope, he now saw—and brought out the contents.

*A Dhia...*

Paper money. A lot of it.

A blue booklet—*British Passport*, it said—with *James A. M. M. Fraser* written neatly on the cover. He opened it to see his own face staring up at him, the same as the photograph on his Oxford
Identification Badge.

Profession: Groundskeeper

Place and Date of Birth: Inverness, Scotland; January 17, 1923

Domicile: Oxford, UK

Height: 6’2”

Colour of Hair: Red

A page entitled Certificate of Birth containing much of the same incorrect information, along with the names of his fictitious parents, George and Harriet Fraser.

Two long, rectangular billets imprinted with his name.

Heathrow → LaGuardia.

LaGuardia → Logan.

A piece of lined, yellow paper, completely filled with handwritten instructions.

#1. Take the 1:30 train to London, staying on until you reach Heathrow.

#2. Show someone the first ticket, and ask them to direct you to the correct terminal. They will ask to see your passport. Give it to them, and follow their instructions.

#3. The aeroplane is like a bus or train but flies in the air. It will be loud and uncomfortable, but it is safe, and it will take only half a day to cross the ocean. If you’ve a nervous stomach, be sure they seat you on the aisle.

#4. When you land in New York, show an attendant the second billet. You will have to go through customs, which is a kind of inspection….

On and on the detailed instructions went, telling about something known as Time Zones, how he might exchange his pounds for American currency upon arrival, and how to hail and pay for a taxicab (which he took to be a small, hired Van) to take him to 1400 Fury Street in a place in Boston, Massachusetts. The colonies, Jamie breathed. She was in the bloody colonies.

#8. There should be enough money to see to any needs you may have along the journey, and some besides.

Jamie’s hands were shaking, but there was more.

A white envelope, containing an official-looking document. He read the words at the top of the page.

“Irrevocable trust for Brianna Ellen, child of Claire Randall…”

It was several minutes before Jamie could resume. Brianna Ellen…. His daughter’s name was Brianna Ellen….

“...Claire Randall, née Beauchamp…established November 25, 1948…To be increased annually until she shall reach eighteen years of age…”

The last, a sheet Oxford stationery:
Needed to know that you were everything she said you were. I am sorry for it...for what all of my blood have done to you.

Do not misunderstand. I think that I shall continue to hate you until the day I die.

Take care of them.

FWR

Jamie hunched his body around the treasures that lay strewn across his lap, sheltering them, though his own tears spattered onto the pages.

“Oh, Christ bless you, Englishman.”

While he had prayed on Randall’s behalf many times, it was the first time he had uttered these words with no rancor whatsoever. There was only pure gratitude and dawning joy in Jamie’s heart. He had been given everything he needed and more in order to reach his wife and child...by a man who had every reason to see him condemned and locked away.

The words of the reverend echoed in Jamie’s mind: *We all are granted grace at pivotal times in our lives.* Frank Randall had shown him grace today, in an abundance Jamie could never have imagined or hope to repay.

“Thank you. Thank you, Frank,” he said, hoping that somehow, in some way, the man might hear. “Be ye well, man.”

Chapter End Notes

Songs referenced in the chapter

*Chattanoogie Shoe Shine Boy (1950), Red Foley*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6QaW0a7DeM&feature=youtu.be

*Hymne à l’amour (1950), Edith Piaf*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gTGmbA40ZQ&feature=youtu.be

-From whence comes the title! "As long as love will flood my mornings..."


-[Note that the translations used in the fic are not necessarily word-for-word. I took some liberties to convey the emotion behind the lyrics of what I find to be an incredibly powerful and intimate song.]
Chapter 5

“Are we nearly there, sir?” Jamie asked, his throat impossibly dry and his stomach reeling.

“Not far at all,” the TaxiCab driver said genially, looking back at Jamie in the wee mirror. “Fury Street is less than a mile off.”

Jamie murmured a word of thanks, then sat back in the seat, trying not to vomit. The lurching and banging about of the small yellow Van was only the smallest measure of the turmoil inside him: Claire and his child were less than a mile off.

He had followed Frank’s instructions to the letter, and had encountered no great logistical difficulties on the journey that couldn’t be solved by asking uniformed attendants for assistance. The voyage across the sea in the flying AeroPlane had been a blur, and he didn’t remember much of it. Well, no…he remembered that he’d vomited often and profusely in the wee privy and that he’d gotten alarmed looks from his fellow travelers over his general state of distress. Most of it was washed out by blackness, thank goodness, for it hadn’t been only the sickness or the prospect of traveling on the wing, defying God’s intentions that man stay on the ground that made the journey a torturous one…it was the waiting…but also the immediacy…the knowledge that in just a short time…

Jamie looked out the TaxiCab window for distraction. Houses and streets flew by in a green blur. Every limb was shaking madly, and he was sweating profusely into the newly-bought Suit, the hat clutched in his hands. He had had just enough money left over after arriving at the AeroPort in Boston to purchase it. He would arrive practically a pauper, once he paid the driver, but what did that matter? He’d find a way to provide for his family as soon as he could. At least he looked presentable for Claire; worthy of her.

Would she answer the door alone, that he might catch her up into his arms? Or might she be holding the wee lass? Aye, perhaps that was the best way…he could gather them both up against his chest, then; feel the warmth of them together, melting the three of them together into one flesh. Would Claire cry, he wondered. He certainly would. He felt like doing so at this very moment just at the thought. He gripped his knees so tightly he could feel the nails sharp through the fabric.

“Here we are, 1400 Fury,” the man said jovially, drawing them to a shuddering halt.

Jamie barely recalled paying, bidding farewell, exiting the vehicle, or anything about the look of the surroundings as he stumbled up the walk. The next thing he became aware of was the door of 1400 Fury Street mere inches from his face.

He set down his small bag of possessions, took a deep breath, and knocked. He waited, his chest radiating with breath and blood and mad flutterings. The door opened and he inhaled sharply, tears brimming in his eyes and mo chridhe on his lips.

The words died in his throat.

“Can I help you?” She was blonde, dressed in a tidy, green frock that stopped at the knees, and giving him a look of mingled confusion and apprehension. A housekeeper, perhaps?

Jamie felt as if he would faint, but he removed his hat as he’d seen other men do, and cleared his throat. “I’m…here to see…Claire?”

The woman’s eyebrows furrowed, outright suspicion now coloring her expression. “There’s no one here by that name.”
“No one—?” Jamie fumbled in his pocket until he came out with Frank’s written instructions. *1400 Fury Street.* Yes, this was the place Frank had indicated. He held out the paper toward the woman. “I was told that a *Claire Randall* would be here.”

“Sir, I don’t know what to tell you, but my husband and I have lived here for the last four weeks.”

“That canna—” Jamie took a step forward to peer over the woman’s shoulder into the house as if to see Claire standing there.

This movement alarmed her, and she made to shut the door.

“Forgive me, Mistress, I—please—*please*,” Jamie choked out in desperation, stepping back to show he meant no harm. “Her name is Claire *Elizabeth Beauchamp Randall*. She’s about this tall, wi’—brown hair and—and a wee daughter who’s—about a year and a half of age—and—”

“I don’t know anything about the last tenant, sir,” she said firmly.

The door of 1400 Fury Street closed with a shattering thud.

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*Six weeks later*

I could touch him in my dreams. I really could.

Could run my fingers through his hair. Feel his hands on me, as real as my own, and feel the heat radiating from them into my flesh just as I burned for him.

But somehow, when I yearned deep for him, pulled him down to me, when he made to enter me, poised hard ready between my legs…*I encountered nothing but ether.* A presence of him would be there, unmistakable…but I would find myself clawing at air, begging of vapor, bucking and pleading against something that could never reach me….and then, he would vanish entirely.

I would wake, as I had this morning…weeping…shuddering in the wake of orgasm; but not one borne of Jamie, not even a *dream-Jamie*…merely the result of bone-deep longing…of grief. The agony of it, of the delight of sight and touch, of the sound of him whispering words (*our* words) over me….without being able to fully reach him…

*That’s how it should be, Beauchamp.*

*If you could have all of him again, even in sleep… how would you ever bring yourself to wake?*
Frank had insisted we stay on at Fury Road after he went back to England, barely three months after we had moved to Boston. “Don’t be foolish, Claire,” he had said tersely over the lawyer’s conference table. “The furniture’s all bought, and we’ve signed a year’s lease. No sense in picking up and finding another place. Stay.”

After my initial vehement aversion to the idea, I had acquiesced. It was a large house, and comfortable, and I was grateful enough to avoid the hassle of moving house while seven months pregnant. As long as I was paying the rent (on which point I had been unyielding), why should it matter that Frank had happened to live there for several months before?

In January of this year though (with Bree over a year old and weaned), I began working part-time at St. George’s Hospital. I didn’t strictly need to yet, for I had money still left from Uncle Lamb’s estate, enough to live comfortably for several years; but as much as I loved being a mother, I also wanted to have a role and purpose outside the home. And so, Mrs. Byrd joined our family as Brianna’s nanny—godsend!—and after passing the American licensure exams, I became a working nurse once more.

In early March, I accepted a new a position at Mercy Memorial, a hospital across town where there was better pay, better shifts, and an administration more accepting of outspoken female employees. Very quickly, though, the long bus ride from Fury Street (sometimes an hour long each way, when the traffic was worst) began to take its toll on my spirits. I loved Mercy, and didn’t want to leave it, but my time with Brianna was precious to me, and I didn’t want to let a single moment go to waste.

Ten weeks ago in April, we had completed the move to our new home. Only fifteen minutes from Mercy by bus, the new house was small, certainly, but we hardly needed much space, the two of us; and it was blessedly far from Fury Street and its ever-present whispers.

“…Divorced!”
“…she must have done something scandalous…”
“…works a job, can you even—?!”
“YES, that’s what Bettie said: four, sometimes FIVE days a week!”
“…that poor, poor child!”
“Someone should call protective services, or….”

The neighbors could take their whispers and shove them up their arses for all I cared. It wasn’t as though any of them had ever offered kindness or even cordiality to Brianna or me once Frank had moved out. I’d have put up with it for my own sake (though it was damn bloody tiresome), but I wouldn’t allow my daughter to grow up in such an environment, to have her branded with my suburban scarlet letter. Thus, the papers were signed and we moved across town. It was in a less desirable neighborhood, to be sure; but the tiny house on Harrington Avenue was mine. There, I could be just plain Claire Beauchamp, respectable war widow. It was the completely fresh start I had craved.

I hadn’t yet written to Frank to give him our new address. For that matter, I hadn’t even informed
him that I had had my name legally changed back to Beauchamp several months ago. While I had called him after the birth, and exchanged a few polite letters at the beginning, over time, I just let the envelopes accumulate untouched on the sideboard. *My life wasn’t any of his damn business*, I’d said many times in justification as the pile caught my eye….but that was grossly unfair of me. The divorce hadn’t been Frank’s fault or decision, after all. He had done everything he should have. There were just…*so many things*…

The coldness between us…*God*, it made my stomach clench tight in anxiety just thinking back on it. We had managed, talking when necessary, but the barrier that had existed since I stumbled down the hill of *Craigh na Dun* never lessened. It was as much of my construction as his, I knew that beyond doubt. Maybe we might have moved past it, in time; been able to get back some of the spark we once had shared, the one that had drawn me to him as a nineteen-year-old with stars in her eyes…or… *maybe not*. There had just come a night when I couldn’t take it any longer. Couldn’t take the jealousy and hurt in his eyes, knowing that I had inflicted it; couldn’t take the slow ossification of my heart as I mourned for everything I had lost since 1946; and couldn’t *bloody* bear the thought of being Frank’s *charity case*. He didn’t see it that way, I knew he didn’t; but I certainly did, and my assessment was the one I had to act upon. I wasn’t about to let the course of my life (let alone Brianna’s) be charted around fear of hurting Frank’s feelings.

*Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ, I sounded a right stone-cold bitch…*So be it.

My leaving *wasn’t* entirely a selfish decision, though. Beyond my own desires and feelings, my remaining shreds of human decency couldn’t let me condemn Frank to that life, either. He didn’t deserve to be saddled with someone who was hard-hearted against him; someone who would always —*always*—choose the other man above him in her heart. I cared about Frank enough to free him, to let him find someone who could make him truly happy, and love him in a way that might make his life joyful once more. He deserved to move on, even if I never could; even if he said that he didn’t want to; even if he said, *begging on his knees before me*, that he loved me.

I didn’t doubt that he did. I just knew that I couldn’t love him in that way ever again.

Or if I could…*I didn’t want to.*

Shaking off the unsettling dreams, I rose, stretching my limbs. I slipped into my dressing gown and walked down the short hall from my bedroom, checking the clock on the wall as I passed: 9:30 am. A bit later than I’d intended, but as I had been working 3:00pm-11:00pm shifts this week—and had another upcoming this afternoon—I didn’t feel any major qualms over having a bit of a lie-in to start the day. Nor, it seemed, as I entered the room at the end of the hall and turned on the light, did my daughter.

“*Good morning, sweetheart,*” I crooned, scooping her out from under the crib blankets and up into my arms. “*Oh, there’s my big girl!*”

She *was* getting big; would be *two* in just a few months! She slumped bonelessly against my shoulder like nothing so much as a warm, heavy slug. She was making small, incoherent grumbling noises, apparently not in the *slightest* agreement that it was time to begin the day. I let her doze for a little longer as I held her close against me, breathing in the scent of her and feeling her little heart thudding against mine. *My sweet Brianna.*

*She* was the strongest reason, if I were being honest; the reason I finally snapped and decided to leave Frank. A life without Jamie…*God knew that was enough of a crushing weight on its own*…
but a life where I was compelled to pretend that he never had existed? To never, not once be able to tell his child—his only flesh and blood—about the bravery and tenderness and honor and kindness or even the name of the man who had given her life and given his own to see her safe? That felt an insufferable betrayal of his memory, and a more monstrous burden than I was able to carry. It had festered in my heart in those early days of my pregnancy, those bleak, stony months with Frank.

And, while in time, Frank might have truly loved the child as his own, I couldn’t bear the thought of being tied to someone who might only—always—see in her the man who had stolen his wife away. A more noble Claire Beauchamp would have trusted that this wouldn’t come to pass, that Frank would rise above it; the living, breathing, flawed, and human Claire, however, wouldn’t risk it.

*Jamie made you promise to go back to Frank,* my guilty conscience had pointed out as I’d grappled on the brink of that fateful decision.

What Jamie wanted, I had shot back, was for us to be safe and provided for, and in his mind, the protection of a good man was the only way it could be accomplished. But I was strong. I was capable and driven. And in my own century—free from such concerns as marauders or famine or sadistic captains of dragoons—I could support and protect us myself. *She* was all I needed; I could take care of the rest.

“Bree, my darling?” I gave my comatose bundle a gentle bounce against my shoulder, trying to rouse her. When this elicited no response other than a grunt of muzzy protest (stubborn wee Fraser), I murmured softly in her ear, “Shall we go to the park today before Grannie Byrd comes?”

At mention of her favorite place in all the world—a place with swings to fly in and ducks to feed—she bolted upright, all slug-a-bed tendencies forgotten. She lurched backward in my arms to fix me with a look of gleeful anticipation. “Gopock?” she said, slamming her hands repeatedly on my shoulders as she bucked up and down. “Pock-pock-pock!”

I laughed and set her down on her feet. “Yes, lovie, let’s get dressed and *go to the park!*”

We packed up our small picnic brunch, walked to the park, and passed the late morning hours together in the glorious sunshine of a Boston summer.

*God, she’s so like him,* I thought as I watched my red-headed daughter judiciously distributing bread among the ducks that thronged around her. Not a perfect copy, but even still-emerging as she was from the pudgy, generic roundness of babyhood, nineteen-and-a-half-month-old Bree had moments when Jamie fairly radiated from her features. Just a flash here; a flicker there. Her mannerisms were like him, too. I thought I’d seen her once or twice push her chubby fingers backward through her hair when she was sleepy or befuddled. Even right at this moment, the oh-so-familiar slant-eyed glare she turned on the duck that snatched the bread from her hand before she was ready made me laugh out loud, and say, “Oh, Jamie, did you see how she—”

The words died in my throat. I closed my mouth.

You must. stop. doing that, I told myself yet again.

*I know,* I snapped back, gritting my teeth and swallowing down the burning lump that had risen in my throat. *I know.*

I had fought for the right to keep Jamie in our lives, and had made sacrifices for it, with no regrets…but I had to fight still harder to keep him at bay.

Someday, as a young woman, Brianna would be old enough to truly understand, to ask questions, to
know the truth of her father and all he had been.

For many years prior to that, Jamie Fraser would be a story, a wonderful story of the father that loved her; the leader of men…a cherished legend. In telling her that story, I believed he would become so for me, as well. Perhaps when that day came, I might begin to heal; might even seek out love again.

For now, though, while she was still far too young to grasp abstract concepts like loss and duty and sacrifice, Jamie existed only as a phantom in my own mind, an ever-changing thing for which I could find no equilibrium. Sometimes he would lay quietly in his grave, kept carefully and completely from my mind; and then, with no warning, he would rise and haunt me relentlessly. Not a ghoulish haunting…one of love and laughter, gentle words and tender kisses, so real in my mind’s eye and ear that I couldn’t help but talk to him….think of him feeding the ducks with our daughter…see him leaning down—with Bree held safe in his arms, a hand carefully cupping her head against his shoulder— to where I sat on the park bench to kiss my lips, and…


One more day, I had said for a long time, just one more….but it was time, now, and I knew it.

Love his daughter. Enjoy your work. Carry his memory… but stop this. Stop the fantasy. Let him rest. Stop.

I repeated this mantra to myself all the rest of the day, and was heartened to find that it helped. My heart was light with the joy of my daughter, and I was eagerly anticipating a rigorous shift at the hospital. Mrs. Byrd—a jovial spinster in her early 60s—arrived promptly at 2:30, and shooed me off, assuring me that she would weather the usual storm of Brianna’s separation anxiety. Bree loved Mrs. Byrd, and would be happy as a clam in her company after the first twenty minutes or so; but my heart still clutched with the usual wave of maternal guilt as I shut the door behind me.

By the time I had reached the bus stop three blocks away, though, I was once more in a calm and happy frame of mind. I waited in line to board, thinking only of the kinds of cases our unit might encounter on a Wednesday night, or which attending physician would be on duty, or—

“Claire?”

Jesus bloody Christ, I whispered, clenching my fists and feeling as though all the breath had been knocked from my body in a single millisecond.

HIS voice. Far away, but clear and hoarse with deep emotion and disbelief, with…

NO. STOP this.

“CLAIRE!”

The phantom voice was closer, now, far louder and more insistent. The pleading in his voice, the need…. A pitiful sound escaped my lips. I wanted to run to him, fling myself into his—

STOP THIS. Let him rest.

I lurched forward up the steps into the bus, my knees shaking so hard I fairly fell into the first available seat. The doors closed and the bus began rolling forward, and I pressed my forehead against the window, squeezing my eyes tight. My breathing shrill and ragged as I began to hyperventilate.

“CLAIRE! SASSENACH! Damn you, LOOK AT ME!”
I screwed my eyes tighter still and clapped my hands over my mouth, though it didn’t keep the wrenching sob from escaping. *His voice was muffled, now, but he sounded so close; so real…*

_Breathe. In. Out._

_It will pass._

_It always passes._

_“C L A I R E !!!”_

_God, please…please let this pass…._

Tears slipped down over my shaking fingers, and I could hear the ghost of his frantic voice chasing me all the way to the thoroughfare, where it was blessedly lost in the bustle of traffic.

_Let. him. rest._
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jamie lay in the road, groaning. The green Van had slowed enough that he wasn’t run over, but the thing had still collided with him hard enough to throw him bodily to the ground. His hands were stinging and the breath was knocked out of him. Jamie hadn’t time to lay about fretting over his bodily hurts, though. Vans—and their occupants—were screaming at him from both directions.

“GET OUT OF THE ROAD!!!”

“FUCKING BUM, Drunk off his ass!!!”

Jamie couldn’t stand, but half-walked, half-crawled on his hands and knees to the side of the road, still heaving. He collapsed against a blue Post Office box, putting his head between his knees. He tried to scream it again, tried to burst his lungs from it, but all he could manage was a strangled whisper. Claire.

Six weeks. Six long, hungry, bone-weary weeks of searching, grasping at straws, and then out of the blue…

*His Claire*, boarding an OmniBus…so heart-rendingly beautiful that the tears had come to his eyes at once and he’d all but crumpled to the ground.

If only she’d heard him; If he’d been able to run faster, call louder! If only he’d found his voice a moment sooner…but damn him, he had doubted his eyes, convinced she was a mirage created out of soul-deep desperation. But no, it was her, unmistakably. Those eyes…*God, those eyes.* Even from far away as he’d run to her, he could see them clearly; still more so as he’d run beside the moving vehicle. So heavy…so sad…

…but real.

---

“Why, yes, Mrs. Randall only recently moved. Haven’t the faintest idea where to, though…”

*Jamie had nearly fainted from relief: she had been there, at 1400 Fury Street. He had had to grip his rosary tight in his pocket to keep from weeping in front of the stranger two doors down. He had also taken the opportunity to retract the series of murderous oaths he had uttered against Frank Randall. The man hadn’t deceived him, then, in sending him to this address. For whatever reason, he just hadn’t been aware of Claire’s departure.*

...No, the reason was clear enough: Claire had chosen not to tell him. Damn you and your stubbornness, Sassenach. Though, he couldn’t help glowing a bit at the knowledge that she hadn’t made efforts to keep Frank apprised of her affairs since the divorce. She wasn’t pining for Randall; she’d wanted free of him for good.
It was evident that the neighbors of Fury Street hadn’t thought much of “the divorcée.” It didn’t seem to cross their minds that Jamie might be someone close to Claire (let alone her husband), for they made shockingly free with their remarks about Claire’s choices and character flaws. One pinch-nosed woman had practically beamed while telling him that “some woman” minded the bairn (“...paying someone to raise your own child!”) while Claire was about her work. At a hospital, all agreed (“...as a nurse!...fine during the war, but NOW?”) but no one knew which or where. Apparently none of the execrable fiends had ever even spoken more than two words to Claire, for none could tell him anything about her, the child, their health, whence they had gone, or a single damn thing about them. Wherever she’d gone, Claire was well shot of these arsewipes. But, Christ... where?

At one neighbor’s recommendation (given in hopes of hastening his removal, Jamie warranted), he had gone immediately to the Post Office, to inquire as to whether Mrs. Randall might have left a forwarding address for her letters. The folk who ran this establishment, however, were even more sour. They had flatly refused to provide him with information about the previous resident of 1400 Fury, seeing as how he couldn’t prove that he was related to the person in question.

He had stood outside the damnable place for a long time, shaking, trying to control his rising panic. He hadn’t connections, or any knowledge of this place. A little money left but that wouldn’t last long.

Damn you, Sassenach. Where have ye gone?

“I’m very sorry, but we haven’t any employees by that name. Have you tried St. Sebastian’s?”

But she was not known at St. Sebastian’s hospital either. Each day, he sojourned further afield, sleeping in alleys and on park benches, walking with only a battered map and the kindness of helpful strangers to guide him on his way through the towns and neighborhoods. Cambridge. Alston. Brighton. Back north to Summer Hill. The very heart of the city.

It was loud, this place; so very loud. At least Oxford and Inverness had had something of home about them: the voices were familiar; the sights of older buildings of his time comforting amid the sea of new. Here...? Here, everything was new, angular, brusque; as if the whole place had been put up in a day, with no time to be expended upon variety. The buildings were taller than he could ever have comprehended; mammoth structures towering into the sky taller than the tallest cathedral he had ever clapped eyes on. There were Vans everywhere, more than he could ever have imagined. The accents harsh and nasal, barely comprehensible at times, as he was to many with whom he interacted. The familiar sounds of nature and life—birdsong; breeze rattling through leaves; the laughing of companions—were drowned out in a constant hissing and banging and echoing and shrieking of man-made things. On top of all this, there was a different energy, here. In England, it seemed that the folk were still recovering from the war—Claire’s war. The Colonies—America seemed to be in a glorious heydey of plenty, as if every person was trying to go the fastest, get the most, speak the loudest. At times, it was like pushing through the throngs of hell; but push he did, for what other choice had he?

“I am not authorized to release confidential employee information without the individual’s consent.”
“No, sir, no Claire Randall in our records.”

Three weeks.

A few days after the last of the money from Randall was gone, he pawned his Suit, ragged and filthy as it now was. He had been loathe to do it; hated the idea of meeting Claire in his Blue Jeans, but he was desperate. He could go a long time on an empty belly, he knew…but not forever.

Dorchester. Roxbury.

Unfortunately, the loss of the Suit had a far greater detriment than he might have anticipated. When he’d worn the proper clothes, with the respectable hat of a gentleman of the time, folk had always been polite, if wary of the urgency evident in his questions. Now, in worn clothing with the dust and smell of travel accumulating on him, he was treated like a beggar, turned away from many buildings before he could even open his mouth.

Roslindale. Brookline. Back north into Boston proper to another hospital not previously known to him. A dead end, as it turned out, like all the rest.

He looked a beggar, rightly enough. He carried his few earth possessions with him in his traveling bag: his map; the documents from Randall; a razor and small bar of soap he had bought; his rosary; and a thin blanket were all he had to his name. He did his best to keep himself clean and shaved, using what means he could come by for water, but this proved difficult. This was another thing he hated about 1950: never in his own time had he troubled himself over vain trifles of his looks. He inwardly rankled with shame at his preoccupation with his own appearance…and even more so when others took pointed notice of it.

“NO, no, you can’t be in here.”

“If you’re not a patient or a visitor, you must leave now.”

Four weeks.

At hospitals where he was denied entry, he was usually able to convince a kind soul to make the necessary inquiries for him, though to no avail. No Claire Randall.


He would find her. He would find her if it took the rest of his days….but he couldn’t silence the fears that screamed constantly in his ear. Had she moved away entirely from Boston? To another part of the country? By all accounts the colonies—the States, that is—were larger than all of Europe combined. How in God’s name was he ever to…

By keeping on. That was how. There was nothing else for it.

“Sir, I won’t talk with you about this any longer.”

“No Randall here. Wish we could help.”

Five weeks.

When there was no money left, and nothing left to sell, he foraged for what little edible plant life grew about and pennies on the street to buy a little sustenance from time to time.

He refused to beg. He prevailed upon the kindness of the church in the worst of times, but his experiences with the Boston church left a poor taste in his mouth, as if he were being judged by the clergy for being down on his luck. As he weren’t already judging himself harshly enough.

“We have a Christine Randall….Might you have gotten the name wrong?”

“Must I call security, or will you leave on your own two feet?”

Six weeks.

Six weeks of walking mile upon mile in the hot, Boston sun. He grew very thin indeed, losing nearly all of the healthy flesh he had regained in his time since coming through the stones. His muscles were firm from the constant exertion but terribly weak from hunger and fatigue, as they had been in the cave. His face and arms grew red from the exposure to the sun in this sweltering place.

North End. Winthrop. Revere.

He couldn’t bear another day…but he couldn’t stop. Could only call to them over and over through increasingly parched lips.

Claire…

Brianna…

Claire…

“Were you asking about Nurse Randall? Claire? Yes, I remember her!”

Jamie had nearly swept the wee, pretty nurse off her feet with joy. She had overheard Jamie’s pleading with the foul besom at the front desk of St. George’s, and had approached him before he had reached the door to the street.

The lass was kind, but apart from remembering Nurse Randall, and saying that Claire had indeed looked well when last seen, she wasn’t of great help. All she knew was that Claire had left this hospital five or six months back to go work at another hospital across town. No one knew which, for apparently Claire had not socialized with the other nurses, but the lass gave Jamie a number of new hospitals to try.

Queens Hospital, nothing.

Harmon United, Barnhill and Bon Secours, nothing.

Nicene. Nothing

He had been halfway to Mercy Memorial, trudging through a residential neighborhood in one of the far outlying suburbs…

…when he’d seen an angel, clothed all in white, boarding an OmniBus.
Jamie ran frantically, scouring the streets. *Lafayette Avenue. Hamilton Street.* He knew from Fury Street that some *Mail Boxes* had family names inscribed upon them. He searched these frantically as he ran. Claire had been dressed just like the hundreds of nurses he had seen in the hospitals—the same short white frock and wee hat. She was on her way to work, then, no doubt; and if she had walked to the *OmniBus* stop, her home must be nearby. *Burgundian Court. Franklin Circle.* An hour of searching passed, and he was sweating profusely. Alarmed looks from folk in their gardens (none of whom would speak to him, *damn their eyes*) made him slow his pace, and then…

Written in gold foil letters, pasted to the side of the black letter box on Harrington Avenue: *C. E. Beauchamp.*

He had only the time to release a deep exhalation, when he heard the sound of a door latch. He jumped, startled to see the green door of the Beauchamp house behind him beginning to open. Jamie leapt behind a wall of shrubbery lining the edge of the small yard, crouching down so as not to be seen. He heard a woman’s voice—an older woman.

“Come on, Bree, baby! Time to go to the market for your Mama.”

Bree….

“Brianna?” he breathed, a lump rising painfully in his throat.

As if her name had conjuring power, a child’s squeal of delighted laughter rang out, resolving into a sing-song refrain of “Mom-ma, mock-it, Mom-maaa, mock-iiiit!”

Jamie convulsed and had to cover his mouth with the back of his hand. *God,* his child’s voice. He clenched his fist and squeezed his eyes tight, feeling as though he would die if he didn’t run to her, if he didn’t take his child away from this stranger and into his arms. But of course, he couldn’t approach her without Claire present; the wee lass wouldn’t know him from Adam, and the caretaker would be terrified, surely. He did turn, though, cautiously, to peek around the bushes in hopes of catching a glimpse of…but no; the woman was already closing the *Van* doors. The contraption roared to life and made off down the road to market.

Jamie released the breath he had been holding. He looked toward heaven and closed his eyes again, leaning back against the bushes and letting it all wash over him in broken sobs, burying his face in the crook of his arm. Two years of longing and wondering; the fear that she had a happy life with Frank; the fear that she had a happy life with Frank; the fear that she or the child had perished; the fear that Randall would keep him in a prison cell and never see her; the fear that he’d never find her in the vast colonies, the weeks and weeks of panicked searching….all of it fell off of him.

“Thank you,” he breathed fervently through his tears. “Thank you. Thank you.”

He laughed, light as a breeze, full to bursting with happiness. All that remained was to plan the moment when he would take his wife back into his arms.

It would be dark in a few hours’ time—ought he wait until morning? No….no, he couldn’t bear another night apart from Claire, now that he knew where she was to be found. Couldn’t bear for his child to be fatherless one day more. No, it would be tonight, as soon as Claire was home and the
woman who cared for Brianna had left.

“Christ, I’m ready for ye, mo nighean donn,” he whispered.

He grimaced suddenly and stood. **No**, not ready. **God**, he looked a right vagabond. He thought longingly back to his *Suit*, of how badly he had wanted to appear to Claire looking as though he belonged in her world. **Vanity**, he chided, *tribe and vanity*; and pointless, besides, for he hadn’t more than a few scavenged coppers to his name. But **vanity or no**, he thought, *damn me if I shall meet Claire looking like the very lowest of beggars.*

He stood for a moment looking back at the wee house, gripped with the irrational fear that if he turned his back, the green door might disappear into some pernicious mist. But turn he did, fixing the spot in his mind as he made his way back toward a wee park he had passed earlier in the day. Finding the small stream that flowed through it (blessedly shielded by a cluster of juniper in one quiet corner), he very cautiously stripped and improvised a kilt from his blanket. He laboriously washed his clothes and set them to dry atop the juniper; then, made shift to wash and shave, though he’d barely enough soap left to manage it. His hair had grown considerably longer since the Barber in Oxford, and there was certainly no pomade to be had, even if he were brave enough to try it.

Blood pounded through his breast as he worked, lighting his body with fire like the *Electric* lights. He felt as though he would fly apart from it.

*Verra soon, mo chridhe. So verra soon.*

He made his way back to Harrington Avenue under cover of darkness. The *Van* was sitting out front once again; the caregiver had not yet left, then. Claire wasn’t home from the hospital. There was no place from which he might observe the front of the house. Very quietly, he crept around to the rear lawn.

He crouched behind a growth of plants that stood next to the tall fence at the back of the property. He felt tears prickle in his eyes as he breathed in. The botanical scents around him were unknown to them in and of their own natures, but as familiar as his own skin. He might have been standing behind her, smelling her hair. *Claire’s garden. Claire’s scent.*

From his vantage point, he could see through the large rear window. He could see the caretaker sitting, knitting at what must have been the kitchen table. Through the small panes of glass in the door itself, he could also see the corridor leading to front door. It was perfect. He would be able to see the moment Claire came home.

*Hours passed. Long, excruciating hours.*

He must have drifted off into contemplation for, with a jolt, he was suddenly aware of the unmistakable slamming of a *Van* door, and the sound of a vehicle making its way up the street, followed by silence. The woman was gone from the table.

*Claire was home.*

He rose shaking to his feet, making his way to the back door.
A Dhia…

He knocked.

He waited.

Again.

Still she did not come.

He knocked harder, his heart thudding so hard against his chest that he thought he would faint.

Still, nothing.

He checked the lock on the door. *It was open.*

Murmuring a silent prayer, he pushed it open and very cautiously stepped inside into the darkened corridor.

Immediately, the cacophonous thrum of what he knew to be music met his ear. With a jolt, he realized that *he had heard the song before.* It was the same one from that night in the Oxfordshire prison. He couldn’t have picked out the tune, but the strange, guttural, rolling tones of the French chanteuse were unmistakable. It was like a *TelePhone,* then? Carried from far away?

It was coming from the closed door to his right, from just beyond the room that held the kitchen table, by the sound of it. He set down his bag and took another step, straining to hear the words.

> *Si un jour la vie t’arrache à moi,*
> *Si tu meurs que tu sois loin de moi,*
> *Peu m’importe si tu m’aimes*
> *Car moi je mourrai aussi.*

“*Oh, Jesus, Claire…*” he whispered, his heart breaking as he leaned against the door.

These were the stanzas that had been too painful for him to contemplate in the darkness of the prison; the ones that he had tried to block out as he’d lain on the cold floor…so completely desolate and alone…so afraid…

> *[If one day life tears you away from me]*
> *if you die and you are far from me*
> *What’s it matter, as long as you love me,*
> *because I will die too]*

*No more heartbreak for us, mo chridhe, none.*

*No more loneliness.*
Not ever.

He slipped off his muddy shoes, took hold of the doorknob, and slowly opened the door.

Holy Mother of God. She was there.

Facing away from him, leaning against the counter on one hand, head hunched between her shoulders. She was in her nurse’s uniform still, the wee white dress, though her shoes, stockings, and hat were nowhere to be seen. The room was mostly dark, illuminated only by a small Lamp on the countertop, but the soft light caught the seams of gold in her hair, unfastened and puddled as it was around her shoulders. It was shorter than he’d last seen it, short as when…he’d first seen her, those years ago…a widow…lost in the world…

Mistress Beauchamp.

Jamie tried to speak, but the wave of emotion had stricken him dumb. The chanteuse gripped his tongue even tighter with her words.

Nous aurons pour nous l’éternité,

Dans le bleu de toute l’immensité.

Dans le ciel, plus de problèmes.

[We will have all eternity, just for us

in the utter blue immensity.

In heaven, we’ll have no more problems]

No, Sassenach, we’ll have now.

Not only heaven.

NOW.

The joy of this gave him voice, at last, just enough to croak, “Claire?” his entire body quivering with the ecstasy of having her close.

He thought he saw her shudder. Her hand came into view, lifting a glass of amber liquid to her lips. Christ, it was her left hand...and there was no gold ring upon it.

She downed the drink, and immediately moved to refill it.

She didn’t turn.

Mon amour crois-tu qu’on s’aime ?

[My love do you believe that we love each other?]

“Claire?” he said again, louder, taking a shaky step forward. Maybe he hadn’t actually spoken aloud the first time.

The music swelled to its climax in a wordless instrumental interlude.

Another swallow.
Still, she didn’t turn.

“Mo nighean donn?” he said, in a clear, loud voice.

_Dieu réunit ceux qui s’aiment._

_[God reunites those who love each other.]_

He couldn’t keep the smile of joy from gasping onto his face. It was so wide it hurt, but he didn’t care. _God_, he could bear all the pain that came from the rapture of having his beloved here before him, mere steps away.

“Claire?”

Her snarl struck him like an arrow in the chest.

“Go…away…Jamie…”

Chapter End Notes

The song lyrics are from Hymne à l’amour (1950), Edith Piaf (the same referenced in Chapter 4)

To paraphrase Wikipedia:

-Piaf wrote this song in early 1949 to her lover, the love of her life, French boxer, Marcel Cerdan.
-On October 28, 1949, Cerdan was killed in a plane crash on his way from Paris to New York to come to see her.
-She recorded the song shortly thereafter in 1950.


[Note that the translations used in the fic are not necessarily word-for-word– I took some liberties to convey the emotion behind the lyrics of what I find to be an incredibly powerful and intimate song.]
Chapter 7

Bleeding out from the heart. Aye. That was it.

He could barely breathe. To hear such a tone in Claire’s voice…such…revulsion….

Go

away

Jamie.

She was still facing away from him, leaning against the counter.

Jamie opened his mouth to speak. God, just turn around… Just look and you’ll see its me… Turn around, mo chridhe… Christ, turn around and see me before ye. “Cl…Claire?” His voice sounded strangled. Higher than usual. His mouth was dry, and each word grated against his throat. “Claire, it’s…it’s me…Jamie.”

“I know it’s you,” she said at once, startling him, “but you’re. not. here.” She clipped each word, then laughed through her nose and took another long draught of whiskey.

A Dhia, that that were true. Surely this was a dream, a nightmare. He was feverish from hunger and fatigue. This wasn’t real. This wasn’t how he met Claire. Was not.

No, he was awake; he could feel his fingernails pressing into his palms, could hear the air that whistled through his nostrils as he struggled to remain calm.

…but that didn’t make the nightmare any less real.

Slowly, footstep by footstep, he moved toward her. “Sassenach…I—am—here. See?”

She made a small noise and stiffened, but made no move to turn. “You always say that….” She was slurring her words. How much had she drunk, then? A considerable amount. “…and you’re always there, alright. Just not…there, there. Like the bloody bus stop.” He saw her raise the glass to her forehead. “Was doing—so well—was going to stop—really…really was—and then you have to go and…” She made a vague gesture with her glass, laughed again, whispered a low, “damn you,” then drained it.

Christ, she had seen him, then; had heard him as he chased the OmniBus. His excitement at this realization was brimming from him as he reached her. “Claire… I ken it sounds… mad, impossible…” He was beside her against the counter, facing her—God, she was even more beautiful than she remembered. “…but I’m here… I’m real!”

Her eyes were shut and she was shaking her head slowly from side to side. She didn’t turn.

Jamie reached out a trembling hand and touched her cheek. He gasped aloud at the feel of her under his palm. How long had he dreamed—? How long had imagined—? She had gasped involuntarily at his touch, too, and Jamie’s heart had leapt…but she immediately gritted her teeth, squeezing her eyes even tighter and repeating under her breath, “No. No. No.”

He turned her gently by the shoulder with his free hand, bringing her to face him. Her face was still pointedly facing the counter, eyes closed. “Claire,” he begged softly, “look at me, love.”
She resisted for another long moment, her facial muscles working in a thrum of effort to resist the rest of her body. Then she did look, opening her eyes and looking straight into his, golden and perfect.

“Oh, *mo chridhe,*” he gasped, taking her face in both his hands as he beamed downward, not daring to take his eyes from her. “Claire...it’s me.”

She stared blankly for a moment. She blinked. Swallowed. Then, slowly, she reached up a hand and laid it atop his, silver ring glinting in the dim light. Jamie leaned his forehead against hers, tears beginning to fall in the agony of waiting for her to speak, to cry, *anything.*

Tentatively, she lifted her other hand to trace the lines of his face. He gave a soft moan and followed her touch, moving with her to try to capture it. The fingers were cool and capable. They moved up to smooth away a wavy lock above his temple, and Jamie had to close his eyes for a moment, bowled over by the intimacy and familiarity contained in such a simple gesture. *They might have been by a roadside in the highlands, or walking through the hay fields at Lallybroch. Husband and wife.*

When he opened his eyes, her mouth was quivering, as though *smile* were trying to fight through. “You cut your hair,” she said, very quietly.

“Aye,” he said, with a gasping laugh. He slowly, carefully wrapped his arms around her waist. “It’s still *me, though.* I promise.”

“Beautiful…” She was smiling, but faintly, and the hand on his face was trembling as it followed the hollow of his cheek down to his lips. “My beautiful….beautiful love…perfect…”

Then, something snapped. Her hands jerked away as though from hot iron, and she stumbled backward. “Stop this, fucking, *fucking* stop this,” she muttered through clenched teeth with a strangled sob, turning back to the counter and pouring more whiskey. “Stop, *stop it,* stop.”

Jamie’s heart, which had rising, soaring with her touch, plunged back into icy dark panic. He growled and pushed the glass from her hand before she could lift it. “Damn you, *Sassenach,* this *isna a dream!*

“…*can’t do this anymore, Beauchamp*…”

He took her by the shoulders again, bodily this time. “It’s *Jamie.* Your husb—” His voice cracked, and the tears surged, hot tears of pain and grief and anger, “—husband. I’m *alive*….I’m *here*….”

“…let him rest….”

He gritted his teeth, anger bubbling to the surface. “Look at me, *mo chridhe*—I need ye to—”

“…*need*…”

Her face had changed, somehow. She was staring at some point in her vision, but not at him, her eyes out of focus from drink. “…*need*…”

He shouted a curse in Gaelic and shook her, very, very hard. “Can ye no’ feel *my hands touching you,* woman? Or yours touching *me,* or—”

Her mouth was on his and the heat of it was so intense that he moaned and opened to her before he even stopped to think. She tasted of whisky and heat, both shooting into his core in a blinding second. He gripped her and twined his fingers hard into her hair. He lost all comprehension of the passage of time, aware only of her mouth…until he realized she was fumbling with the buttons of his
trousers.

“What in God’s—?” He jerked back. “Ye canna be thinking—”

“Yes, I bloody can.” Her jaw was set as she got the Zipper down and she was crying. “Don’t—care—if it’s a dream—”

He pushed her away from him again, taking a step back and looking down at her in horror. “No, Claire, we—”

She staggered and looked up into his face, eyes wet and defiant. “You don’t want me?”

He made a wild gesture as he shouted, “Christ, of course I want ye.” He had gone hard as soon as her greedy lips touched his. “Claire, I have burned—” his hands shook with intensity before him, as though he held his heart in them, “—burned for ye for two long years, but—”

“And I’ve burned for you,” she choked, stepping forward, a fresh tear slipping off her jaw as she reached hungrily for him.

He held her by both shoulders again, pleading. “But I need ye to see me, damn you.” He shook her again, her hair swinging around her face. “I need ye to ken that I’m truly here wi’ ye, and—”

“I do see you…” she cried, cutting him off and struggling against his restraining grip. “…and I need you. I need you, Jamie…” He was shaking so badly that she managed to break his hold and nearly got her arms around him. “It’s been so… long…”

He caught her by both wrists, and pinned her against the counter to keep her still, gritting his teeth and watching as his vision blurred with tears. “You. are. drunk, and we canna—”

She thrashed madly against him, glaring, eyes still not quite focused. “Yes, I’m drunk but I know exactly what I’m doing,” she growled, her cheeks shining. “I know you’re not—know that you’ll disa—disappear as soon as we—” She broke off with a sound of distress and slipped his hold again —Christ, had she always been so strong?—and pressed against his chest. She sunk her lips into his neck, kissing up to the hollow under his jaw, her voice harsh through strangled tears, “—never going—to stop—trying—”

“Claire,” he pleaded, feeling his resolve cracking, emotion and need rooting him to the spot. He was aching so strongly with it that he could barely see straight, and though his arms were raised in a gesture of protest, he couldn’t make his limbs obey to repel her advances. She was breathing deep and raggedly, grabbing wildly to cling to him. Her hands were cold as she ran her hands under his shirt and into his loosened waistband, cupping his bare buttocks. His hips had grown so thin that the trousers fell to his ankles easily at her touch, exposing him. She pressed herself against him, and, with a groan, slipped a hand down between them and grabbed his cock, hard. Jamie cried out, a deep, tearing sound, and so did she, their cries echoing off the walls.

Then, a sound of pure hunger escaped her throat, so deep and animal that—

He flung his arms around her waist and jerked her off her feet, stepping out of the discarded trousers.
and crushing her to his chest. He rucked up her foolishly short skirt so that she could get her legs around him. She was bare underneath. He spread his fingers out across her buttocks—a Dhia, so full and heavy and round—squeezing and kneading as he pulled her hips tight against him.

She wanted him, alright, badly. He could feel the heat radiating from between her legs, the scrape of her hair against his belly as she ground hard against him with her arms tight around his neck, seeking purchase.

And yes, he wanted her; wanted her so badly he thought his cock couldn’t take another moment of this torture, rubbing agonizingly against her arse as she moved. But he had no joy in this; only his need and an ache of despair and fear he’d never have thought possible in Claire’s arms.

*How much of this was drink…and how much was something deeper… more sinister?* He remembered it all too vividly: the wishing and the pretending. He had felt the madness come upon him many times—in the Oxford prison; before the stones; every night in the cave; the need to see her, to talk to her, or to just hold her in his arms. *To not be alone with his grief.* Might hers have taken hold in a way that could never be healed? Was this what Frank had referred to? *The ‘deadness in her eyes’?* The nurses had said she didn’t socialize. The neighbors at Fury Road had said much the same. She had changed her name and fled without telling a soul. *Had the Claire he had known, the home of his heart, died in 1746?*

*God… even with her in his arms at this moment…even as he laid her down on the cold, white floor… even as he knelt and she spread herself before him, already quivering and keening from her need… Jamie’s heart was being torn apart.*

“*Claire,*” he sobbed, hands shaking on her thighs, feeling as thought he’d die if he didn’t have her…feeling as though he were dead already.

“*Jamie, please…*” She was crying, too, but she clawed at him, his hips, his neck, pulling him down to her, begging, “*…come to me… stay with me…please…*”

He felt his eyelids fall closed, time seeming to slow as he allowed himself to be dragged downward, his body remembering the way of hers without thought. His throat burned with grief. His chest heaved with loss. He felt his breath hot on his lips as he whispered, “*Til our life shall be done, Claire.*”

And with a sob of despair, he thrust home.

The next second was an explosion in Jamie’s senses.

*The feeling of her on his cock…* He’d had no other woman, and he cried out with a cracked sound of ecstatic need, as if he would lose himself there and then. But it wasn’t desire to delay his impending release that made him go still as stone and the blood freeze in his veins.

*It was Claire’s scream.*

She had gone white as her gown. Slack-jawed. Unmoving. Seeming not even to breathe.

Panicked, Jamie pushed himself back, “*Christ, have I hurt ye, Claire?! Have I—*” But even as he said it, he knew he hadn’t. He didn’t even need to look at their still-joined flesh for signs of damage, as had been his first impulse. *That scream…that hadn’t been the sharp “oh!” that sometimes accompanies sudden joining. The sound Claire had made was something more visceral: utter shock… and utter terror.*

She was staring at him, *directly* now, as if seeing him for the first time, all befuddlement of drink
apparently vanished. Her hands were gripped so tightly on his arms that he was sure the fingernails would draw blood. Her pale lips suddenly parted, and though he barely heard the syllables, he saw the look in her eyes. *Recognition.*

“Ja…Ja…mie?”

Jamie let loose a desperate, tearing sob. He fell forward onto one forearm, scooping his hand beneath her head. “YES, yes, its me—I’m here, *mo chridhe—I’m here.*”

His face was mere inches from hers now, but she was still staring at him, her brows raised and joined in the middle in the shock, horror, and dawning comprehension that flew across her face in quick succession. “I….Jamie…? Wh….Jamie…?”

He was weeping and laughing in equal measure, and kissed her forehead before resting his own against it. “Aye, it’s ME, sweetheart—it’s me—it’s truly me—it’s your Jamie, I swear—” He brought his other hand—shaking uncontrollably, like the rest of him—to cup her cheek, his whole body fixated on the need to hold her, surround her. He felt her contract around him and he gasped out in dawning joy, “*Can ye feel me, now? Can ye feel me inside ye, Claire?*”

“Yes…yes….,” she breathed, and he could see in her look that it was so, the thoughts exploding across her glass face. She fumbled one hand under his shirt. She cried out as the fingers met the ridges of his scars. “You’re here,” she gasped, grabbing for his face. “JAMIE—How—*h—ow*?” Before he could answer, she stiffened, looking up with eyes wide and streaming; and so very sad. “Does this…am…am I dead, too?”

“No,” he said, smiling wide and tasting the salt that trickled into his mouth, palming her face over and over “No, no, no, my Sassenach, you’re no’ dead. We are alive, the both of us. I wouldna ever lie to ye…least of all in heaven.”

“But you died”—she said in a grating whisper, her hand a vice on the back of his neck, now. “You—died—at Cul—.”

“Survived—*survived*, Claire”—Jamie choked out, palming her face over and over. “And I dinna ken how but I touched the stones and fell—”

“Jesus H—”

“—and I found myself here, Claire, *1950—*”

“You’re—”

“—through to your time, and—”

“You’re here?” she sobbed, shaking him.

“Aye, I’m truly here—”

A storm of tears overtook them both as she reached up fiercely for his mouth. Jamie bent to her, despair vanished, intent on nothing but tasting her, feeling her in his arms; feeling her touching him and knowing him to be there. The hand cupping the back of her head held her tight against him and his cock involuntarily pushed deeper inside her.

A deep, guttural sound escaped her against his mouth. “Oh….*oh my God.*” Her eyes rolled back and the lids flicked shut as she moved against him in return, bringing him in still further. “Oh—*God—*”
“Jesus…Christ…” Jamie echoed, feeling his blood run hot as lead. He forced himself to move slowly—so slowly—slipping all the way out…and then in, slowly, inch by inch until her breathing hitched and she made a mewling sound against his cheek. “Mo ghraidh…” he moaned, closing his eyes, feeling tears running down his jaw.

She was grabbing fistfuls of his shirt and pulling herself full against him, forcing him in deeper, “—don’t—bloody—stop—”

He didn’t. He doubled his speed and sank into her, over and over, calling her name.

She was struggling furiously with the buttons down the front of her frock, panting. “I need—I need—”

Without a word, he rolled his weight back onto his knees and ripped the dress open down the front, buttons flying everywhere. He put an arm beneath her back so that she could remove the sleeves. On impulse, he brought his other arm beneath her and lifted her bodily off the floor, never breaking their fragile link. She lowered herself down onto him, bringing him impossibly deep as he settled back onto his haunches. The shirt came over his head in a flash of blue, the flimsy garment that bound her breasts fell to the ground, and there was nothing, nothing, between them. Jamie lowered his mouth to capture a nipple, so hard and soft at once, hearing her cry out. He trailed upward to her neck. He could feel the shapes of her beneath his hands as he gripped her to him, against his chest, under his lips: so small, and yet so strong.

“Jamie, you’re—I’ve—” she sobbed as she rode him, arms around his neck, cupping the back of his head as he cupped hers. “—I’ve—missed you—so much—”

Jamie was weeping, too, so hard that he could barely do more than croak as he pulled and pushed her against him by the base of her spine and buried his face in her shoulder. “—been—searching so long—couldna find ye—I thought you’d—”

“—I couldn’t bear to let you go—”

“—Mo nighean donn—”

They both lost words, then. It didn’t take long, pounding as they were with such frenzy and desperate need. She was underneath him again on the white tiles. He slid his hands under her, lowering himself and holding her tight against him. She clung to him just as tight, and when Jamie felt her begin to come apart around him, he followed her; followed his wife into that place where they were one flesh. Where time was of no concern any longer.

“No!” she cried, heaving, when he made to pull out of her at last. “Don’t you dare.”

“What—?”

Her teeth were gritted and her tears still flowing freely as she gripped him, eyes boring into his, wild with fear. “Don’t you fucking—dare—leave me…”

“No, no, mo ghraidh,” he murmured, breath ragged and heart pounding. He caved his shoulders and pressed the length of his body against hers, sheltering her. “I shall never be parted from ye, again, Claire… ever. I swear it.”

After a time, he made to shift position again and she moaned once more in panicked protest, her
Making small, soothing sounds, he tucked her securely against his chest and rolled, setting them both onto their sides. He took care not to unsheathe from her even for a moment, letting their limbs intertwine. She was still frantic, and was saying his name over and over, grasping him to her as if to keep him from vanishing. He pressed every inch of his arms against her body, holding her to him. “Never…not ever,” he whispered to calm her, though he was breaking apart, too. “Not…not…oh, Christ, Claire…”

They wept. Wept until there were no more tears between them. Clinging together, murmuring, affirming over and over to one another those most simple and yet unfathomable truths.

Here

Alive

Together
Chapter 8

I awoke in my bed…

No.

…and experienced sheer… gut-tearing… despair.

_Holy Mary, please, no._

_Not again._

Then strong arms tightened gently around me and I felt warm breath move across my forehead. I cried out and the arms gripped me hard in response. I grappled furiously to find his mouth in the dark. He was grappling for mine, too, and when we found one another, we disappeared into the warm dark; soft, urgent sounds floating up and surrounding us like a cloud of sweet smoke, hiding us, enclosing us.

He shifted and I was crying hard into the warm skin of his neck, my world shrunk to the hands holding me, the familiar scent of him, and the cracking question that forced its way out of my throat.

_“It really happened?”_

He wasn’t crying, but his voice shook. “Aye, _mo chridhe_, it wasna a dream. I’m really here.”

_Really. Here._

_Not a dream._

After a time, I nodded hard and released him, trying to catch my breath, croaking, “Light?”

He sounded embarrassed. “I— _how_?”

_“The—the lamp on the table by your elbow. Twist the little switch just under the shade.”_  

He rolled over and, after some fumbling and vain tries, turned the switch and flooded the room with light. I heard him mutter something wonderingly in Gaelic as he lay on his side craning his neck to peek under the shade, and I wondered for a moment how much (if anything) he had learned of electricity. I didn’t expend a lot of energy on this line of thought. I could see him now in full light for the first time. The scars on his back were clear as day, the graceful curve of his buttocks just peeking out from beneath the coverlet. I reached out a hand to touch him; then, needing more, I shifted myself and lay full against him, spoon-fashion. He made a small, tender sound deep in his throat and turned his head back over his shoulder as far as he could, holding the arm I’d brought around his chest. I pressed my cheek against his back, my tears slipping down and finding the criss-crossed tracks of his scars.

_“When did we move to the bed?”_ I whispered, trying to find some banal topic that might allow me to regain my composure. _Fat chance._

_“Few hours ago. Ye didna try to fight me on it, thank God.”_ He rolled over to face me, _Jesus bloody Christ, he was beautiful_. Sunburned and lined, yes, but still my Jamie in every way. A fresh wave of emotion smote me and I covered my face, shaking violently.

Jamie, by contrast, sounded practically _cheery_. “Mind, I did _try_ to stay in ye as long as possible,
Sassenach. The spirit was willing, but the flesh…well, the flesh was verra cold and contrived a retreat to a warmer spot. Figured you and I might as well follow suit, aye?

A sob burst into a laugh and I choked, hacking and sputtering. I placed a steadying hand on his chest and blinked up at him through running eyes. “Are you really—really—making penile jo—jokes—at a time like this?”

He smiled widely. “Aye, I am. I shall jest about floppy cocks or whatever else makes ye laugh.” The impish grin softened into a beautiful thing of immense tenderness. “We are together now, mo nighean donn, forever…and I dinna mean to spend the rest of our lives crying.”

“I’m not sure I’ll—ever be able—to stop.”

He leaned forward and held my face in both hands, wiping the moisture away with his thumbs and murmuring gentle hey noises.

“Will it really be the rest of our lives?” I blurted.

He pulled back and looked as though I’d punched him in the stomach. “And why should it not be?”

“I don’t know,” I said, sniffing. “It’s all just…we were together and happy before, weren’t we? And then the war came and…and...damn you, Jamie, you died.” It was stupidly said, but I was shaking from the true horror implicit in it; the memory.

“I know, mo chridhe…and even death couldna stop us, could it?” He took my hand and kissed it. “I like our chances just fine.”

I breathed deeply, finally feeling my heart begin to resume its normal pace; the whirling melee of my emotions stilling enough for the demands of logic to reassert themselves once more. “How?”

“How what?”

“How in the world did you do it? Survive Culloden? Come through the stones?”

He was silent for a moment. “Would ye understand if I asked not to talk of those things?” I hesitated, the lump in my throat at the pain in his eyes too heavy, and he hastily added, “Not now, I mean! I’ll tell ye all, I swear. I’ve naught to hide from ye, it’s only—”

“Oh, of course, Jamie,” I said softly, touching his face. “Not tonight.”

Plenty of time for that.

He exhaled heavily and laid his hand over mine.

My curiosity was too strong to simply be ignored altogether, though. “Can I just ask…” He raised his eyebrows in silent permission. “Once you were through, how on earth did you find me?”

He gave a kind of weak smile. “Went to every hospital in Boston asking after Nurse Randall. Walked until my shoes fairly wore out. T’was naught but by chance that I saw ye at the OmniBus. Aye, that was me,” he said, seeing my shock. “Even though ye slipped away, I nearly died on the spot from happiness at seeing ye there in front of me, Claire.” He pulled me tighter against him, his voice hoarse. “To ken that ye hadn’a moved to another part o’ the country, or some such. I’d been so afraid that I’d never find ye, mo ghraidh. So verra afraid.”

I kissed his shoulder, lips trembling. “And I was trying—so hard—to forget,” I said haltingly. “To
keep you from my mind. When I heard your voice—so clearly—God, it just brought it all falling down. Could barely make it through the day on my feet. Just needed to get home. To the whiskey,” I whispered, ashamed. Another thought struck and I pulled back to look at him. “How—how did you know I was in Boston, though, Jamie?

It was no more than a whisper, but he said the word with the unmistakable air of one utterly thunderstruck. “Frank.”

I couldn’t have spoken if I’d tried. As it was, there were simply no words.

“Sought him out at Oxford, ken. He wasna o’er pleased to see me…but in the end…he took pity on me. Gave me all he was able to in order to get me to ye…and to Brianna.”

Reeling from rampant speculation about what exactly had occurred during the meeting of Frank W. Randall and James Alexander Malcolm Mackenzie Fraser (Jesus H. Roosevelt CHRIST!!), it took me a moment to register what he’d said.

Breeinnah.

I looked up into his face and was bowled over by the sweet, hungry light in his eyes; by hearing the name of our child (however novel in pronunciation) leave his lips.

Our baby.

That baby.

The baby that he had tried to give his life for. That he had never seen or held.

“Wait here,” I whispered, beginning to rise, smiling, but with a lump in my throat.

He blanched and caught my arm. “No! Ye dinna—ye shouldn’a wake her!” Joy and eagerness in his expression were now joined by a distinct strain of anxiety.

My God…he was afraid to meet her.

I put a hand on his arm. “Jamie…”

He stillled. Took a breath. Nodded.

Rising, I slipped on my dressing gown and walked down the hall to Bree’s room, my heart pounding. It had been an unusually warm day, even for July, and I saw that Mrs. Byrd had opted not to put Brianna to bed in her customary suit, but instead only a light cotton diaper cover. Even so, her skin was blazing to the touch as I scooped her up and brought her to my shoulder. She automatically tucked her face against my neck, snuggling close. Sweet thing. Or…sweet to me...

Suddenly, I was terrified as Jamie and prayed a silent prayer against disaster. Bree was old enough to put up a fuss about anyone she didn’t take a shine to—and did. Good gracious, she even wailed when I turned her over to Mrs Byrd—to whom Bree was devoted—almost daily.

What if Brianna wouldn’t let Jamie hold her?

What if she was afraid of him?

My stomach clenched in dread...but there was nothing for it.

Coming down the hall, I could see that he was sitting on the edge of the bed, expectant, braced. He’d
found a light blanket and improvised a kilt, but his chest was bare. I could see it heaving, even as he tried hard to maintain his composure.

My arms tightened around her as I stepped through the doorway. My voice cracked as I spoke, breaking along with my heart as I whispered the words that had twice been ripped away from me by shattering tragedy

“You’re a father, Jamie.”

He made a small, heart-rending sound, then another as I walked toward him and the lamplight caught his daughter’s hair. *His* hair.

“Bree?” I said softly, tickling the pudgy cheek that rested under my chin. Bree gave a sleepy *ma ma ma* against my shoulder and, as I had hoped, turned her head to face the other direction. *Toward Jamie.*

“Oh, Christ,” he breathed, in a voice tight and strangled with tears. “Oh... *Claire...*” He was standing now, just a foot or two from us, looking down transfixed at the small face, his eyes red and flowing. “Claire...she’s...”

He reached out a shaking hand toward her; then faltered and lowered it again.

*It had to be done.*

“Bree,” I murmured, joy and anxiety battling within me.

She gave a tiny grunt.

“This is *Daddy.* The one we pray for, remember? *Daddy.*”

The little eyes snapped open and fixed on Jamie.

He froze, his face a perfect blank of terror as though he were looking at a hand about to slap him.

I held my breath.

*Please, baby.*

*Please...please, Bree, don’t shy away from him.*

Then, in a glorious outburst of that wholehearted vigor of toddlerhood, she lurched her top half toward him—very nearly making me *drop* her—and declared, “*DA.*”

He caught her with a sob. “Aye, that’s right, *mo chríde...*” She looked so small in his arms as he gathered her against his chest, his arm covering her back and head as he wept brokenly. “Aye, *it’s your Da, sweetheart...*”

The shock of that sent a sob through me, cleaving me in two. What had been to Bree and me simply her best attempt to parrot my own word had been to Jamie a perfect and complete name.

*Da.*

Not Dad. Not Daddy.

*Da. What Jamie would have called his own father.*
Why, you bloody little charmer, I thought, but I was too moved to be wry. Too thankful. Too overjoyed. She was snuggled against him just as she had been cuddled against me, her tiny curls tickling his neck. I stood silent, covering my mouth and feeling the tears slipping down over my fingers.

He had been speaking to her soft in Gaelic, kissing her, crying freely and cupping her head tight against him. With a force that surprised him, though, she suddenly pushed back hard to look at his face, screwing up her features as if puzzling him out.

He stared back, eyes wide.

Then, apparently deciding that he had passed her second test as well, she sang out a happy, “Da da da-da daaaaa,” and grabbed at his lower lip with both hands.

Jamie laughed and kissed them, which made her giggle, bounce up and down in his arms, and smush her palms even harder against his mouth.

Jamie played right along, but held out a hand for me. I came at once, wrapping my arms around them both. I leaned my head against his chest, so perfectly happy I didn’t think I could bear it.

Brianna snuggled down again against his other shoulder, cooing a contented, “Daaaaaaa.”

“Was it a hard birth, mo chridhe? Another hard one?”

“Yes. Very hard.”

The faintest hints of morning light were beginning to touch the room, but I could feel the pull of sleep on its way, about to bring us back under. We were leaned back against the pillows, Bree sound asleep on Jamie’s chest. The pair of them were skin to skin, peaceful and intimate as a dream.

I swallowed, shifting against Jamie’s shoulder and rubbing Bree’s back softly. “They thought at one point that she…she wasn’t going to make it, and she had to be delivered by emergency cesarean section.” Very quietly, I added, “We’d both have died for certain, if I had stayed.”

Jamie murmured a prayer. “Was there anyone to be there wi’ ye?” he asked quietly. “To look after ye? Be of a comfort?”

Did he mean Frank?

I tried to keep the hardness out of my voice, but failed. “No one I wanted there.”

Jamie heard it, and keeping one steadying hand on Bree, turned to look me in the eye. “I ken Frank wasna there, Claire. He told me.”

Oh. Well.

I still felt annoyed, somehow; on guard. “I thought…maybe you were making an oblique statement about how he should have been there…would have been, if I’d done as you asked.”

He shook his head. “No, that wasna in my mind.” He shuddered. “God kens I wouldna be here if ye had stayed marrit to Frank.”
“You wouldn’t?”

“No.” He swallowed and sounded choked. “If I’d discovered ye had a happy life wi’ him...if you and he and the bairn had real love between ye...I’d no’ have interfered.”

I opened my mouth to castigate him for this outrageous hypothetical choice, but he smiled and put a hand on my hip. “It’s of no concern, now, mo chridhe. Ye did leave him, and we’re all together, now. When I asked ye to go back to him, it was in hopes that you and Brianna would have as safe and happy a life as possible. And I thought that ye would have had a better chance of it wi’ ... wi’ someone who loved ye already.”

“I might have been happy...if I’d wanted to be,” I admitted, irrational guilt buzzing through my insides and making me feel as if I wanted to flee or cry. Face it head-on, Beauchamp. “But are you cross with me, Jamie? For choosing to raise Bree alone?”

He thought about that for a long minute.

The anxiety writhed in my gut like a ball of worms. I knew I’d made the right choice...but then again, I’d made it never thinking I’d have to answer to Jamie Fraser for it.

“It’s a verra different thing, 1950,” he said quietly at last. “I’ve seen enough to ken that, and enough to ken how much the place terrifies me.”

I waited.

“And all I can say is...Christ, Claire....ye’ve done well."

I raised my head. He took my hand and I could see the fervor in his eyes. “Ye’ve made a home. Earned your way. Ye’ve raised our child and put up wi’ everyone who’s judged ye even though they’ve not a damn clue who ye are or what you’ve been through. Jesus, just—everything.”

I felt tears prickle in my eyes again, Jesus Christ would the crying never stop?

“I ken it hasna been easy, Sassenach...and I canna say that it’s the path I’d have chosen for ye....but I couldna be more proud.”

No one, not a single person since I’d returned—not even Mrs Byrd, kind as she was—had ever truly acknowledged me with approval. I’d been ignored, whispered about, tolerated, well-meaningly pitied, avoided, and even openly scorned; all of which I could handle, but yes, it all hurt, and made me feel more alone than I could have dreamed.

I felt a wave of shame for how much simple praise meant to me, but then quelled it. I didn’t need it... but God, to have it....and from Jamie...

No, it seemed clear that my happiness’s state of matter would be liquid for quite a long time to come.
As Thieves

“JESUS H—Jamie, what the bloody hell—?”

I had been rudely awakened by an extremely large and heavy Scot rolling across my legs. It was full morning now, and through bleary eyes, I could see him crouched low to the ground, stark naked, his fists raised and his attention fixed on the doorway, through which was drifting—

“Jamie,” I groaned hoarsely, still coming out of sleep. “It’s just the phone.” He was breathing heavily and didn’t immediately respond. “It’s a machine that—”

“I ken what a TelePhone is,” Jamie said over his shoulder in a testy fashion that suggested that while that might be true, he hadn’t known that one had been the source of the sound. This hypothesis was confirmed when he mumbled, “Didna ken they were kept in houses.”

He straightened, but lost none that look of scenting imminent danger, not taking his eyes from the door for a moment. “Christ, must they be so damnably loud?” he demanded irritably back at me.

“Well, yes! One has to be able to hear them, after all!”

Actually, I probably needed to turn the ringer up even louder, as it hadn’t been loud enough to wake me. James Alexander “warrior-instincts-never-die” Fraser had seen to that.

“Hear them?” He was breathing very heavily, his voice high and full of flustered annoyance. “Ye could hear that thing all the way from Scotl—”

“BUM!”

We swiveled our heads in unison toward the diminutive speaker.

Brianna was sitting up on the bed, just at my elbow, and was baring her jack-o-lantern teeth in a hysterical grin as she said again, “Bum.”

I looked from Bree to Jamie’s bare haunches and had to bite my lips, very hard. Jamie, still looking at me over his shoulder, seemed to be having equal difficulty. I could see his shoulder quaking silently, though part of his effort was certainly from keeping still to prevent giving his daughter any more inadvertent anatomy quizzes.

Facing Bree, I tried to keep my voice conversational. “You, erm….do you see a bum, sweetheart?”

She gave me a look that clearly demonstrated pity for my dimness and pointed at the item in question. “Bum Da.”

We exploded. I doubled over and Bree began to cackle, thrilled with herself. Jamie sunk to the ground, his back against the bed, so that his uproarious laughter floated up from the floor.

God, I honestly couldn’t remember the last time I had heard him laugh, really laugh. It had to have been long before Culloden, surely, as bleak as those last months of the campaign had been. The sheer joy of hearing it poured fuel on my hilarity, and I was genuinely struggling to catch my breath between bouts of coughing and giggles.

Jamie, too. He hooted and breathed deeply as he got to his knees and turned to rest his arms on the mattress facing us. He gave a huge, final exhale and laid his cheek on the coverlet, putting a hand on
my thigh and gripping me. “God, it’s good to laugh wi’ ye, again, Sassenach.”

He looked so young, smiling broadly up at me that way. My lad. I ran my fingers lightly through his hair. I still wasn’t used to having it so short. Or here.

“And as for you, a nighean,” he said, turning to rest his head on his chin, facing our offspring, “looks as though Da’s going to have to be far more careful about where he shows his bum, now, aye?”


I tossed him a blanket, and, once decent, he sat on the edge of the bed, making silly faces across the way at Bree. She couldn’t stop staring at him. Her grin was face-splitting, in fact, and she didn’t look away even as she pushed her little bottom up into the air, took three wobbly steps across the mattress, stumbled, and fell headlong into his waiting arms.

“Good gracious,” I said wonderingly.

“What’s that?”

I pursed my lips. “Brianna Ellen, lately Beauchamp, is extremely selective about making new acquaintances, and yet she’s taken to you like a duck to water!”

“Duck?” Bree said, ears pricking up.

“I think I ought to feel a bit jealous!” I added, in mock pique.

“Do ye?” Jamie asked, looking distinctly nervous overtop the curly red head. “Feel jealous?”

“Duck!”

“No,” I said, laughing, bending forward to kiss his bare shoulder. “Not one bit. It's...it's absolutely perfect, Jamie.” He beamed. I did, too, seeing them together, drawn together like magnets.

It was only natural, I supposed, for Jamie to crave contact with her, to look intently at her, to try and absorb all he could of her; but for Bree, who was too young to understand the significance of Jamie's appearance, what was it that drew her to him? Was it genetics, some common frequency of their blood that attuned her to him? Or, might it simply be novelty? Come to think of it, I didn’t think Brianna had ever really seen a grown man before up close. She’d never met Frank, of course. All of the adults with whom she interacted regularly were women: Mrs Byrd, me, and one or two of my nurse friends from Mercy. Her whole male experience would be a brief glance at Father Gentry at mass or a passerby in the supermarket.

Yes...perhaps the unfamiliarity of the male face was some of it...but there was no way in hell I would suggest such a thing. Let’s just call it ‘love.’ It will be soon, in any case, I thought, with a contented pang.

“DUCK!” Bree said again, sounding decidedly annoyed that her contribution to the conversation was being ignored.

“Where’s a duck, mo chridhe?” Jamie asked her seriously.

“Pock!”

I laughed. “That’s right, lovie, the ducks are at the park.”

He got to his feet with Bree in his arms, swaying her gently from side to side. “Is it normal for a wee
lass of her age to ken so many words?"

I couldn't help but grin at the bursting pride in his voice. "Oh, I think so. They usually have quite a number of words by eighteen months, and she’s going on twenty. She’s just starting to put them together, now, though."

Jamie gave his daughter a winning grin. "Well, ye got ‘bum Da’ right enough, ye clever wee thing." We all giggled again and Bree started up a game of peek-a-boo by "hiding" under her father’s chin and then popping up again seconds later. Jamie played right along, acting absolutely flabbergasted with shock everything time she reappeared, making her go red as their hair with uncontrollable giggles.

Yes, thick. as. thieves, those two, I thought, alight with so much joy it bubbled out into a need to tell him everything. "Her first word was dog. We were walking on the Common, and a golden retriever came up and licked her hand. She cried and fairly screamed it: DOG!! Just like that! Then, the next one was NO when we were trying sliced bananas with breakfast and she was not having it, so she —"

I glanced up to see that Jamie's face had gone markedly stiff and pale. He was clenching his jaw and looking toward the chest of drawers...trying not to look at me.

"Jamie? What ever is the matter?" Alarmed, I stood and went to his side. So tense was his manner that I half-expected him to turn away, but he pulled me hard against him with his free arm instead. He didn’t speak, but I could feel him swallowing thickly, and see tears forming behind his lashes. "Oh...Jamie..."

I put my arms around them both, rubbing his back as I looked up at him. "You’ll be here for all the rest, Jamie. All of it."

"Aye," he croaked after a few moments, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "Aye, and God be praised for it."

I kissed him on the cheek and heard his stomach rumble. "Hungry?"

"Starved."

He did look thin, now that I surveyed him in the light of day. While still broad in shoulder and sturdy-looking as ever, his cheeks were decidedly gaunt, and I could see the shadow of every single one of his ribs, faintly, but there.

I cleared my throat and blinked back moisture from my eyes at the sight. "Well, I’m still not much of a cook, but I bet I can manage a proper fry-up. Normally its just fruit and toast for us of a morning, but you need to get some meat back on your bones, so it's bacon and butter until it comes out your ears."

He bent down and kissed me in thanks, very gently.

As I made my way down the hall toward the kitchen, I heard the sound of a second kiss.

"I’ll always be here, m’annsachd. Its a promise."

It was absolutely uncanny, the way the soft coo of her response matched Jamie’s tender tone.

"Duuuuuck bum."
“Jamie?”

“Mmm?”

“I can feel your eyes boring straight into the back of my head,” she said with a laugh.

Jamie laughed too but looked quickly away, saying, “Your arse, more like.” He reached over by way of distraction to extricate the curl that Brianna had taken to chewing while waiting for her breakfast.

Actually, while his wife’s arse did look quite fine outlined by the lavender-colored dressing gown, it was the apparent ease with which she manipulated the kitchen machines that had kept him spellbound for the last quarter hour. The way she produced beans (sauce and all) from a large, metal cartridge; brought forth eggs, butter, milk, and sliced bacon from the yellow cooling cupboard that kept all fresh (indefinitely?) until needed. No fires to tend; no animals to slaughter or gather from; hot and cold water upon command; not to mention the sheer abundance of additional food visible both within the Frigidaire and the many cupboards. Even the furnishings: the fact that someone had taken pains to contrive a wee chair with a tray attached specifically for bairns at mealtimes somehow made his head spin.

As much as Jamie had already seen in 1950, and as achingly hungry as he was, he was absolutely staggered by it all. It was almost too much. The strangeness and newness of everything had been known to him ever since coming through the stones, of course; it wasn’t at all as if he hadn’t taken mind of them. But somehow, his mission—that absolute imperative to find Claire and the child—had put such things behind a gauzy curtain: visible, real, but not important enough to examine closely. Now, though…

Marvelous, it was, all of it, but….

Christ, as if he didn’t already feel enough of a simpleton in her world.

Claire smiled back over her shoulder, giving the pan on the Stove a stir before turning to set toast, berries, and sort of white custard (he thought Claire had called it Iogerd) in front of Brianna. “Well, it must be quite a sight to keep your attention so long. Enjoying the view?”

“Yes ken that I am.” He was, after all, and he took an appraising look in earnest this time as she turned back to the counter. “It’s rounded out quite a bit—that and your breasts—though the rest of ye hasna seemed to, I must say.”

She looked pleased by this. “A few of the lingering perks of pregnancy. Though, if you were to look more closely, you’d see other less desirable changes in the mix, as well.”

“Well, be that as it may, your ‘mix’ will never not be desirable to me, mo ghraidh.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said, beaming. She walked over to the table and began sliding the contents of the pan onto his plate. “There’s plenty more of everything, so don’t be shy.”

He wasn’t, and had wolfed down a fair quantity of it by the time she turned again to ask what he might like to drink. He laboriously swallowed the mouthful of beans and fried bread. “Is there ale?”

She laughed. “Sorry, I’m afraid not. It isn’t customary to drink alcoholic beverages before 5:00 in the
evening, anymore, except on special occasions. There’s coffee, though, or orange juice—"

"Both, if it isna too much trouble."

Christ, he was hungry. He hadn’t filled his belly to his satisfaction since leaving Oxford, and he was presently finding the prospect of bursting preferable to that of stopping. As she set down his third helpings, though, he regained his senses enough to look up sharply and say, “You’ll sit down and have some yourself, now, Sassenach.”

She was clattering about with the pots and pans. “In just a moment, I promise.”

Jamie drank deeply of his second mug of strong, dark coffee, and caught his daughter looking intently at him from her wee chair. She had been happily shoveling breakfast into her mouth by hand and—haphazardly, evidenced by her wee, white beard—by spoon, with an enthusiasm that rivaled his own. She was still now, though, holding a single, battered square of toast about the size of his thumb. She considered it for a moment, then held it out toward him, tilting her head to one side. Oddly touched, Jamie leaned forward and took the gift with a smile and a slight bow. Brianna looked very pleased indeed when he popped it into his mouth. He placed a kiss in her sticky hair.

“Oh, GOOD LORD!” Claire suddenly shrieked.

He stood at once in alarm. “Are ye hurt?”

She whirled around and leaned back on the counter, face a mask of horror. “Are you in the country illegally?”

Interpreting his stunned moment of relief as incomprehension, she crossed to him, grabbing his arms and looking up, wide-eyed. “Jamie, if you don’t have proper papers, they could deport you at any time! But Britain won’t have record of you either and—Oh, Jesus H. Christ, this is not—ohMPHH!”

He had stopped her mouth with a kiss, a good one. She fluttered against him for a moment as if to pull away, then stilled, and relaxed into the sweetness of the moment with him. Her lips were soft and full, and he loved feeling her tongue move gently against his.

Releasing her at last, he held her face and smiled. “Peu m’important les problèmes, mon amour” [All the problems matter little, my love…].

She raised her eyebrows but returned the smile, finishing the lyric. “…puisque tu m’aimes” […since you love me]. “And since when do you know Edith Piaf?”

She shook her head and furrowed her brows sharply once again. “But, Jamie, we do have some fairly serious problems to contend with, from a legal standpoint.”

He kissed her again. “Wait just a moment, aye?”

His small bag of belongings was sitting by the back door, just where he’d left it. He spread the contents on the table and resumed his seat, gesturing to her. “James Fraser is a documented British citizen, thanks to Frank Randall.”

“Jesus, Frank…” she whispered, staring down at the passport and birth certificate.

Jamie adjusted his blanket kilt and reached up to wrap his arm around her waist.

She was shaking her head, disbelieving. “He would’ve had to pull a lot of strings to make this
happen. He’s well-connected, but this is *ten kinds of illegal*, so it wouldn’t have…have….Oh, *God.*”

She sat down hard in the chair beside him, clutching the document detailing the *Irrevocable Trust* in Brianna’s name.

Jamie searched her face. “Ye didna ken, then? That he’d set aside a provision for her?”

She shook her head, looking blank. “He…*might* have told me about it, I suppose. He sent me letters….stopped opening them after a time.” She made a strangled sound and began to weep angrily. “*Why* the bloody *hell* did you have to go and do such a *ridiculous* thing, Frank?”

Jamie took up his coffee once more, allowing her a minute or two of privacy with her tears before saying softly, “He loves ye verra much, Claire.”

She wiped her eyes furiously and looked up. “Loves. *Not loved*?”

“*Loves,*” he said definitely. ‘He didna use that word precisely, but…aye. If he wished ye ill, he’d have let me rot in prison, I think.”

“*PRISON???”*

As succinctly as might be, Jamie recounted his interaction with Frank Randall, the ensuing altercation, and his stay and subsequent release from the Oxford prison.

She had a slight but wry smile on her face by the end of it. “I think you *both* needed that. To hit one another, I mean.”

“Think ye may be right,” he agreed with a laugh. “Wish I hadnad hit him *quite* so hard, though.”

She gave a weak chuckle, then stiffened and looked off to the side. “Was he...what you imagined?”

Jamie considered that for a time. “As much as I was able to imagine, I suppose. He certainly had the look of the Randalls about him,” he shuddered. “If ye mean, did he live up to my expectations in himself, though….aye, he did. While we didna precisely get on….he’s a good, honorable man. I see why ye marrit him,” he said with a quiet smile. “And…” *Christ, it hurt to admit it, but…”* “I think…he would have been a good father to the lass, had it come to it.”

“Yes…he would’ve.” She stiffened, the document crinkling under her hand on the tabletop. “Surely, we can’t accept this, Jamie. How could we possibly? After everything? After all I put him through?”

She pushed the paper from her and scrubbed her face hard in her hands.

Jamie sat for a while, looking at Brianna. “I’ll stand by whatsoever ye decide on the matter….but I think ye must accept it.”

She looked up, not having expected this.

He looked back to the tabletop and smoothed the wrinkled paper. “It’ll be Brianna’s to do with as she pleases when she comes of age, aye? If, at that time, she wishes to use it or give it away, so be it, but it’ll be her choice, regardless. But Frank set aside the funds *well after* ye’d left him, Claire, after the lass had been born, even. If it had been done while he still thought he’d be the child’s father, that would be another matter entirely; but he kent *full well* what he was doing.” He laid his hand over hers, squeezing lightly. “*I say let the man have this,* at least: his honor for having done something for the wee lass. *For you.*”

She took a ragged breath and after a time, nodded. “I’ll write to him. To thank him. *For all of it.*”
She leaned into his shoulder, the pair of them just holding one another, breathing together. Something white caught Jamie’s eye on the floor over her shoulder, and he laughed. “I’m sorry I ruined your wee dress last night.”

“My…? Oh!” She sprang at once to her feet, throwing him back in his chair. “Must phone the hospital and tell them I’ll be out until further notice. Mrs. Byrd, too, must warn her about—oh, good gracious, if she had just walked in…!”

The hospital. Christ, of course…It couldn’t just be the three of them happy at home forever. She would have her work. The thought made him feel the same wave of panic that had its claws in him earlier: the overwhelming, irrefutable fact that he knew absolutely nothing…and that no fit husband or father would allow himself to be in such a despicable state.

He tried to speak confidently. “Ye dinna have to miss your work on my account, Sassenach.” He grabbed a napkin and quickly cleaned Bree’s face and hands before lifting her out of the chair into his arms. “The lass and I can keep each other company, if ye must report for—”

“No,” she said at once, looking up to meet his eye, the green TelePhone forgotten in her hand. “We need time together, Jamie. Nothing is as important as that.”

“We’ve got time in plenty,” he said diffidently, though his heart was rising with relief.

“I know, but—but it needs to be now. Eventually, this—this, having you here!—will become normal and we’ll just live quiet lives, but…I need as much time with you as I can, right now, and with our daughter.”

“I need that too, mo ghraidh,” he said, hoarse with emotion. He bent down with Brianna in his arms to kiss his wife’s cheek. A quiver of anxiousness made him add, “For me, it willna ever be normal, I think, but it’ll be us.”

She looked up sharply, and studied him intently, as if hearing his fear. “You’re going to be splendid, here,” she said, rubbing his arm and I haven’t the slightest doubt.”

“Down!” Brianna said loudly in his ear.

“S’kind of ye to say, Sassenach,” he said absently as he set Bree onto her feet. He watched as she began methodically to gather the array of white buttons that scattered the floor.

“Jamie, I mean it.” Claire set the TelePhone back on its hook and put her arms around his waist, hugging him tight and murmuring into his chest, “You’re going to be brilliant.”

He held her close and laid his head atop hers, praying she was right; thankful beyond measure that she was his…even if she were wrong.
Touch

Chapter Summary

Just a wee scenelet mostly for my audience on tumblr. I nearly cut it because didn’t fit well with either of the flanking chapters but I didn’t want to lose entirely, so…BONUS SCENE!

ANON ASKED: here’s an idea for your Boston au, how about Jamie and Claire sharing a hot bath or a shower

“Bide there for a time, aye, wee Bree?” Jamie cajoled, gingerly placing the lass in her Crib. He had minded her happily for the past half hour since breakfast while Claire made Telephone calls; but when he’d become aware of the sounds from the washroom—the squeak of Shower handles and the whoosh of water being summoned forth—he had felt the lack of her so acutely as to be painful. He needed to be holding his wife. Only her.

He watched her silently from the door. She was naked, silver, and lean, one graceful leg extended behind her as she bent to test the heat of the water. As she stepped into the tub and turned to pull the curtain shut, though, she caught sight of him and started so violently that she slipped and began to fall.

Jamie lunged forward. “Christ, are ye—?”

“Fine,” she said, shaky and breathless, managing to catch her balance before he reached her. She closed her eyes and shook her head as though to dispel an ache. “Fine, I just—oh God, for just that moment…” She gave a little sob, clutched the edge of the curtain hard, and looked up. “…I’d forgotten…”

“Mo chridhe…”

How many times already in these precious first hours had he felt the same jolt? That shock of pure, astonished ecstasy at the fact of her presence…and the inability to keep at bay the ghosts of memory that associated her face with the agony and grief of her loss?

It was the same with her, he knew, for her face was transparent as ever, her eyes misted over with equal measures of pain and love. She held out a hand to him and brought him to her.

She still fit perfectly to him, just the right height to lean his head against hers. He held her in the steaming downpour by back and nape, letting the water wash over them.

He hadn’t had a proper washing since Oxford, and the feeling of the hot water was glorious in and of itself; but it was Claire that brought solace into his very bones. She moved slowly, trance-like, her eyes closed, making small sounds of love against him as she washed and caressed him. He surrendered himself to her, not by way of seduction, for—by some unspoken understanding—neither sought to tease or arouse the other; but rather in the way that marble submits to the sculptor: expectant of the promise that one person’s touch will create beauty. She traced him with her hands, slow and seeking; traveling over the contours of him with her lips; discovering every muscle and bone of him; learning him; confirming him.
There were sounds all around them: the thrum of the water on their skin and on the ground. Their breathing. Contented babbles from the next room. Birdsong from outdoors.

But Claire’s touch on his body rang out as a silent proclamation, drowning out the rest.

You exist. And you are mine.
“Excellent news, my love!” I called as I trundled, heavy-laden, through the door and into the sitting room, “You won’t have to walk around in a blanket any longer!”

“Och, that’s too bad.” Jamie was smiling broadly at me from the sofa, Bree on his lap and a book spread out across hers. “I quite liked wearing a kilt again.”

The improvised garment, donned once more after bathing (in scorn of his ragged blue jeans), was wrapped firmly about his waist, and for the first time since I forcibly disrobed him in my kitchen last night, he was wearing a shirt. Pity, that.

It was just after one o’clock and I’d returned from the department store with an impressive array of shoes, shirts, trousers, pajamas, neckties, and all manner of other things. Admittedly, it would have made things far simpler in terms of sizing and cut selections if Jamie had simply accompanied me. He had insisted, however, that he wished to stay at home with Brianna rather than have me call for Mrs. Byrd. He’d seemed so eager that I hadn’t pushed the matter. Seeing them sitting together--she snuggled against him, freshly besmocked and rosy-cheeked--I was glad I hadn’t. My loves.

Bree, in her usual fashion, broke the idyllic scene almost at once. “Book,” she barked up at her erstwhile reader, little face screwed up in displeasure.

“Book… peas.”

“That’s right, a nighean. I’d be happy to finish the wee book since ye asked nicely. Almost done, Sassenach,” he said with a grin, picking up the picture book.

“So,” he read grandly, “the poky little puppy had to go to bed wi’out a single bite of shortcake…. and he felt verra sorry for himself.”

I burst out laughing, the sheer absurdity of hearing these foolish words in Jamie Fraser’s voice (Praise be to God!) so delightful I couldn’t even contain myself.

Jamie carried on, but there was laughter in his voice, too, and his eyes were crinkled up as he read the last page. “And the next morning, someone had put up a sign that read: no desserts EVER unless puppies NEVER dig holes under this fence again!”

He closed the book, considered for a moment, then craned his neck to look down at his daughter. “If that isna the most pointless story I ever heard, I dinna ken what is.”

I snorted. “It really is! Hardly high art, but for some reason it’s her favorite.”

“Oh, the reason’s obvious enough. ‘Cause she’s the greedy wee pup that eats all the sweets,” he said, tickling Brianna’s round belly. She giggled and squirmed. “I will say, though,” he said, examining the back cover as he bounced her on his knee, “it truly is incredible how they printed it thus, wi’ all the colors and drawings just so. Was it expensive, this wee book?”

“No,” I said, trying not to show my amusement, “not a bit, in fact. Printing has simply come quite a long way in two hundred years.”

“Um’ginn!” Brianna pushed the little golden-bound book in Jamie’s hands up toward his face, her
own aglow. “’Um’ginn!”

He raised his eyebrows.

“…peas.”

Jamie smiled and obediently opened the book again, but Bree seemed content just to point and babble about the pictures rather than demanding a second reading.

“It’s just as well you didn’t feel equal to venturing out to the department store, darling,” I said genially, beginning to sort through the parcels and lay the articles out on the coffee table. “It was a madhouse! I think I ended up with a good selection for you to try, though. Will you come take a look?”

I’d unpacked the last of it before realizing that he hadn’t responded. I looked over and saw him staring down at Bree’s book, brows furrowed, not blinking.

“Jamie?”

He looked up blankly for a moment, then came to and gave me quick smile. “Oh…oh, aye. Thank you, Sassenach.” He set Bree down and walked over to look at my wares.

“Do try them on so we can see what your best sizes are, won’t you? I’ll put Bree down for a nap and then we can look together and see—”

“Nooo-nap,” Bree said definitely.

“Oh, yes, NAP,” I said right back, scooping her up off the floor. “Off we go, lovie.” I cast a smile back at Jamie on my way out of the room. His back was turned, though, head bent down over the coffee table, and he didn’t see. “Won’t be but a few minutes, Jamie.”

When I came back into the room, he was naked, the pair of brown trousers in hand as if he were about to try them on, but not making any move to do so. He just stood, still as a stone, faced away from me.

“Jamie?” I said tentatively. “Is everything alri–”

I had just enough time to perceive the trousers dropping from his hand as he turned and the deep, blue burning in his eyes before his hands and mouth were on me. I moaned, all my senses rushing in response and bringing me hard against him with the intensity of my longing.

He was hiking up my skirt, and—my God!—even as underweight as he was, he was still unbelievably strong. He had me on the ground in a moment, one hand grabbing my arse and rooting me to him, with a groan of need from both of us. Our coupling last night had been far from gentle—but this was fearsome; in no way brutal or unwanted, but alarming in its intensity. The fury of it roused me more strongly than I could ever remember and it seemed mere seconds—though certainly it was longer—before I was quivering and clenching around him and he growling into my ear as he found his own release.

When conscious thought returned, I was gasping heavily, laughing a bit, loving the feeling of his bare chest above me, hot and slick with sweat. “Much as I’ve—been enjoying all the passionate lovemaking on the floor—” I panted happily, “think we might—take advantage of our nice, soft bed for round three?”

He didn’t laugh. He didn’t even smile. He just stared down at me, eyes full of….
“Jamie?” I reached up to lay my hand on his neck and jaw above me, frightened. “Jamie, love, what on earth is the matter?”

He kept looking down unblinking into my face, brows furrowed hard. When he spoke, his voice was deep and cracked. “I want…to be a man for ye, Claire.”

Well…that was quite a statement…and one for which I seemed to have absolutely no response.

He seemed to find confirmation of something terrible in my muteness and shook his head, looking distinctly ashamed. “I dinna feel like a man…wi’ you and the bairn.”

I sat up abruptly, such that we slipped apart and he rolled off of me with a grunt. “Jesus H--Of all the terrible things to say!”

He had shot my heart right down to my feet, the bubble of joy that had been growing steadily at seeing Bree in her father’s arms bursting with that single statement. He’d looked so joyful to be with Brianna, so contented and at peace…and yet somehow two hours alone minding a baby had made him less of a man?

Before I could reason it away, my hurt was barreling out of me like missiles, hot and angry. “Jamie, you were the one that wanted to stay home with Bree! I told you we could have called Mrs. Byrd, and if you’d just bloody told me that I was –emasculating you by–”

“Christ, no!” he said at once, kneeling before me and looking into my face in deepest alarm. “Sassenach, that isna what I meant at all.” He put a reassuring hand on my knee. “Taking care of my child doesna make me less of a man—it’s my joy.” His face burned with the truth of this, and then darkened. “….but being a coward does.” He gestured to the bags and parcels, teeth gritting. “I should have gone along wi’ ye today.”

I stared at him. “The–the bloody clothes?” Relief and exasperation joined the hurt and anger already collectively in complete control of my tongue. “You’re–not a man because you didn’t–go shopping with me?”

“It isna about the damned–” he snarled in frustration, gesturing wildly and practically shouting, “I havena been a man since you left before Culloden!”

I felt exactly like I was veering off a cliff, screaming as I watched the catastrophe unfold, my insides shredding with terror, but unable to stop, fear and instinct propelling me even further and faster downward. I grabbed at my racing thoughts wildly, lashing out with, “So you’re not a man unless you bed your wife and show her who’s in charge, is that what you’re bloody saying to me?”

“NO, God, Claire, that’s NO’–” His words choked off in what was clearly—Jesus H. Christ—a sob. He sat down hard, leaning against the coffee table and putting his face in his hands. “Christ,” he whispered, sounding as terrified as I felt.

This isn’t how I remembered us.

I took a deep, shaking breath and closed my eyes, drawing my knees up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them, hiding in the momentary haven of dark.

Just listen to him, Beauchamp.

It’s going to take some time to be accustomed to one another’s moods again.

This is Jamie. Your Jamie.
He isn’t trying to say anything awful, so stop trying to paint him into a corner out of your own fears.

I blew out the breath. When I spoke, my voice was quiet, but calm. “I’m listening, darling. Tell me what you were wanting to say.”

He took a breath himself and raised his head with a grateful nod, though he kept his eyes closed. He paused. Then…

“After Culloden, I lived in a cave for two years.”

“Oh… Jamie…” I breathed.

His voice was heavy and lifeless. “There was a price on my head, ken. If the Redcoats had caught me at Lallybroch and the family been found to have harbored me…” he shuddered, “they’d all have been punished. Or killed. It was as bad as ye said it would be, Claire. Still is, for them…”

He looked up and saw the tears running down my cheeks, his expression softening somewhat. “Dinna fash, mo nighean donn. I left them better taken care of than when I was there, I promise.”

A momentary qualm of dread rippled through me at that. From his tone, I thought that perhaps it had not yet occurred to him that while in one sense, his family was alive and well, every single one—Ian…Jenny…the children…God, our Fergus—was dead and had lain beneath the earth for centuries, now. When might the finality of those losses hit him, I wondered? For they had certainly hit me, many…many times.

…but that wasn’t why I was crying now.

“A cave?” I croaked, the pain squeezing my heart like a vice.

He nodded. “Tiny wee thing. No bigger than the front hall, there.”

Nine feet long. Maybe not even that. My Jamie had lived like an animal in a hole for two years.

I saw his gauntness differently, now. Not just a man who had been tired and hungry for six weeks…a man who had been living in earthly hell since our parting.

I wanted to touch him, hold him…but I forced myself to be still.

Listen, Beauchamp.

“Every second I spent out of that cave, I put my family in jeopardy.” He was crying still, but his expression was hard and fierce, wild. “Every single person I loved…all the ones left to me…were in danger because of me.” He gritted his teeth, almost spitting the words. “And so, I hid. Didna remove myself from the country so that they might truly be safe from me. Hid…because I was too afraid to be completely alone in the world.”

He looked directly at me, then, his eyes full of pain and a deep, palpable shame. “That’s the man I’ve been since I sent you away, Claire… a coward. A man that hides and risks those he loves.” He shook his head with a look of disgust. “I dinna want to be that man anymore, for you or the bairn.”

“Jamie…” I said, equally bewildered and heartbroken for him. I did touch him now, laying both hands on his chest. “Surely you don’t truly believe you could ever bring us harm?”

“Maybe no…and maybe it’s naught but my pride…” He looked away, and I heard the fresh wave of tears he was gritting back. “…but I dinna want to be an embarrassment to ye either,
Claire….someone ye must constantly apologize for.”

I took his face hard in both hands, trying to get him to look at me. “Never. You never will.”

He made a sound of frustration. “Won’t I? When I dinna understand how a–a Frigidaire works, or canna drive a Van, or dinna ken what happened in the year 1870–”

I released him. “Jamie, for Christ’s sake, those things don’t bloody–”

“I’m sorry,” he said suddenly, closing his eyes and shaking his head, gesturing to quell me. His voice was quiet and calm. “Truly, I am sorry, mo chridhe. I’ve gotten fashed when I didna mean to.” He laughed weakly, wiping his tears away with the back of his hand. “Christ, I didna mean to say any of this.”

He reached forward and ran his fingers back through my hair, his face still and serious, but tender. “When I came to ye like that just now…when I lay wi’ ye, I only wanted to be near ye, Claire…and then to tell ye that I’m going to face things—even when I ‘dinna feel equal’ to them–so that I might bring ye honor…that I’m no’ going to hide.”

I opened my mouth at once, both to apologize profusely for my careless choice of words that had started this whole debacle and to tell him it was alright to bloody hide. He’d been here for less than a day, for Christ’s sake, and I certainly hadn’t adjusted to life in a new century overnight!

But before I could speak, he put a gentle hand to my lips. “I just need ye to hear my promise to ye, Claire: I’m going to work verra hard to be a good man, a proper man, for you and the lass.”

I could see the light shining from his eyes as he said it and while I still felt well-meaning protests bubbling upward, something in me knew it would be wrong to take this from him: the mantle of care and mission and personal responsibility that he had apparently lacked for so long, whose absence had made him–in his own eyes, at least–less of a man.

“Thank you,” I said simply. “I trust you with my life; and Bree’s.”

He exhaled deeply. So did I, relieved beyond measure to have found the right words. The tension between us dissolved into the quiet of the house, leaving behind only tenderness. Closeness.

“I shall…need a great deal of help, ken?” he said quietly. “This place…I feel so verra…” He leaned hard into my shoulder with a troubled sigh. “I dinna even ken a tenth of all the things that I dinna ken. The ways things are done. How I’m to act or dress or behave. What’s to be my place.” He kissed my neck softly and murmured, so vulnerable and so hopeful at once, “You’ll help me?”

“Of course, “I said, willing him to hear my sincerity. “Of course, sweetheart.” I cradled his head against my shoulder. “We’re neither of us alone anymore, Jamie.”

He exhaled heavily and squeezed me tight.

“There’s the two of us, now,” I whispered.

From across the house, there drifted a plaintive, “Ma-maaaaaa?”

We both shook with silent laughter but did not loosen our holds, not yet ready to be parted, desperate to keep this moment of utter peace.

From the silence, there came a begrudging, “…peas?”
We laughed aloud, then, and reluctantly broke apart, Jamie kissing my forehead before rising, beaming. “The two of us….and the one besides.”
“James Fraser, open this BLOODY door right this GODDAMN minute!”

“Our dear Mrs. Byrd reminds me,” the barricade on the other side said with an infuriating placidness that made me want to kick it in the balls, “that it is the worst of all bad luck for the groom to see the bride on her wedding day before the altar.”

I groaned in exasperation. “Jamie, we’re already married, for pete’s sake!”

“And yet when I said as much yesterday, it didna matter for tuppence, and off we went to the City Hall.”

I thunked my head sharply against the bedroom door. “It’s a government thing, Jamie! You know we’re married and I know we’re married,” I kicked the door in petulant emphasis, “but we have to do it officially so you can get your green card and keep from being bloody deported!” I twisted and yanked the knob again, but he had an iron-firm grip on the thing. I growled. “And if we’d done as I said and just signed the blasted marriage license yesterday when we were at City Hall, we’d be properly wed and off to the Cape by now!”

“And I shall say again what I said to ye yesterday: we shall be marrit in kirk…or no’ at all.”

My choice words were drowned out by an enraptured, “Oh, he’s a romantic on top of being scrumptious enough to eat, Ms. Beauchamp! Quite a catch!”

“Would you like to reel him in yourself, Penelope? We’re not officially married at the moment and he’s rather an insufferable MULE when he wants his way.”

“Oh, honey, don’t you tempt me!”

Despite my annoyance, I couldn’t help but laugh at that. Mrs Byrd was in her fifties, unmarried, and rather a saucy sort of broad with an unabashed appreciation for the male form. I could just imagine the half-teasing (half not) look she was giving Jamie.

We had decided that our story—when it was necessary to give one—would be that Jamie had served in the British Empire service abroad, the precise regiments and locations (conveniently) classified; that he had been captured soon after deployment while on a dangerous assignment; and the British government had incorrectly recorded him as killed in action, leaving me a pregnant widow; that only now was he able to escape and make his way home to me; and, finally, that the records of our first marriage had been lost due to a fire at the military base in England, where we had lived before his apparent death. Simple enough, and not unheard of. Anyone with eyes would be able to see that Brianna was indeed Jamie’s biological child, and if they assumed her to have been conceived illegitimately, then to hell with them.

Mrs Byrd, however, had accepted this explanation yesterday with no question, only pressing me hard to her ample bosom and weeping for joy, “Oh, my dear! My sweet dears!” she had said over and over.
Brianna wasn’t the only person who had been thoroughly and instantly charmed by James Fraser. Penelope, too, had taken to Jamie with immense enthusiasm, plying him with all the good food and motherly attentions he could ever have dreamed of. While lovely in and of itself, I felt distinctly outnumbered and outmanned at the moment.

“Now,” Jamie’s voice came brightly through the door. “Mrs. Byrd, wee Brianna, and I are off to the shops to get me properly attired—”

“The clothes you already have will be fine, Jamie! There are those grey slacks and—”

“—properly attired,” he continued firmly, “and we’ll meet ye in kirk at 11:00, aye?” Silence. “AYE?”

“One manipulative Scottish brute STILL on the marriage market, Mrs. Byrd…”

I could hear the grin in his voice. “I love you too, Sassenach.”

He was right, though, damn his hide.

It wasn’t meant to be a wedding gown, just a tea-length dress with capped sleeves fashioned in a soft, cream-colored satin. I’d been rushing to the department store check-out counter with my primary purchase, and had only seen it by chance out of the corner of my eye. It was, without doubt, the most ridiculous garment I had worn since Versailles, a veritable cupcake of voluminous tulle with a matching lacy hat. I’d planned to simply wear my peach-colored suit and pumps…

…but seeing his face as I came down the quiet aisle of St. Michael’s, with his mother’s pearls around my neck and the small posy of yellow roses that I’d chosen thinking of her and of Lallybroch … yes, I was glad of the dress, glad to do honor to Jamie in this way. For, to wear just any clothes would have done him a disservice, glad to honor to Jamie in this way. For, to wear just any clothes would have done him a disservice, telling him that this day was like any other to me. It was not. God, it was not; not in any conceivable way. Jamie had known that at City Hall, and peeved as I had been at the time…I wouldn’t have traded this moment for anything.

He was, quite simply, stunning, standing up at the altar holding Bree in his arms, waiting for the priest to arrive. It was remarkable what two days of good sleep and good feeding had done for him. While still thin, there were no shadows under his eyes, and his cheeks were positively glowing. His morning suit fit like a dream, and he was wearing a blue necktie that made his eyes blaze with such vibrance as to actually make me blink.

No plaid; no brooch; no boots or dirk; hair short and lightly styled with pomade. He truly couldn’t have looked more different from the man I had married five years ago—good grief, I seemed to have exchanged Rob Roy for Cary Grant!—but he was still utterly my Jamie….and still breath-taking.

As I reached them, he leaned his head down to Bree’s, looking out from under his eyelashes at me and sounding rather thunderstruck. “Mama looks verra lovely, aye?”

“Aye!” Brianna squeaked automatically, having incorporated this word promptly into her vocabulary.

“So does Da,” I said fervently, taking his free hand and squeezing.
“Oh?” he said, and I smiled to see his look of shy gratification. “It’s…alright, then, the Suit?”

Odd, that my throat felt so dry and yet my eyes seemed about to overflow. “You’re beautiful, Jamie.”

He smiled broadly and leaned down to kiss me. Before our lips could touch, however, a loud POOF and a blinding flash made us start and jump back, and Brianna to shriek.

“Jamie Fraser,” I said, incredulous, surveying the tiny bespectacled man to my right now being tutted at by Mrs. Byrd. “Of all things…you brought a photographer?”

He shrugged sheepishly, adjusting his grip on Brianna. “Mrs. Byrd said it was the proper thing for weddings. God kens I hate the lightning flashes…but I should like to have a portrait of what ye look like on this day.” He placed his free hand gently, so very gently, on my neck, thumb tracing my jawline, eyes soft. “You’re even more beautiful today than the first time I marrit ye, mo nighean donn…and even then ye nearly stopped my heart. It’s a wonder I’m still standing.”

Yes…yes, it was a wonder. That he stood here before me, touching my face. That he held his daughter in his arms. That he still drew breath. Thank you, I prayed silently, as I held him and Bree close. THANK YOU, and never let me never stop giving thanks.

“Ah, Ms. Beauchamp, you’ve arrived! Welcome, my dear, welcome!”

Father Gentry, middle-aged and genial, was the reason Brianna and I had begun attending St. Michael’s in the first place, he being deeply connected with his faith without placing undue import on dogmatic or procedural concerns. Thank goodness, for I didn’t think many priests would have allowed a last-minute wedding on a Saturday without a proper mass between a couple who already had a child together! But he and I had spoken many times since I’d joined his congregation, such that he had known of the loss of Brianna’s father, though not the true circumstances, of course. He’d baptized Brianna himself, in fact, and his chapel had been one of the few true emotional refuges I had had these last two years. The dear man had nearly broken down himself and wept when I had turned up at the rectory yesterday, Jamie in tow, to explain and beg his assistance with an unconventional wedding.

He beamed at us. “A beautiful family you make, and a blessed day. Shall we begin?”

“If ye please, Father,” Jamie said, passing Bree off to Mrs. Byrd and taking my hand. “I should like verra much to be marrit to this woman again.”

By choice, there was no music, limited liturgy, and no witnesses save Brianna, Mrs. Byrd, and the photographer; and yet, it was one of the most peaceful and moving ceremonies I’d ever witnessed, let alone participated in.

We broke at different times, Jamie and me.

For my part, it was in saying the words of the marriage vows.

“I take thee, James, to be my husband…”

I hadn’t meant them the last time I’d spoken these words to Jamie; hadn’t meant them in the slightest; nor had I believed him to.

“…to love, honor, and protect…”
He had meant them, though; had meant them and not strayed from them.

“….for better and for worse…”

For me, though, these words were brand-new, the most important ones I had ever uttered in my life. It was as if I poured my very soul into every syllable, such that I could barely croak through tears that hovered on the verge of sobs.

“….to have and to hold from this day forth, ’til death us do part.”

For Jamie, it began when Father Gentry looked expectantly at him and asked, “Have you the rings?”

“Rings?” Jamie looked panicked. “We need more than one? I didna—”

I touched his arm reassuringly, then reached in my handbag and placed both rings in the Father’s hand: my silver interlace and the sturdy, gold band I had bought that morning.

“James,” I said, repeating after the Father as I took Jamie’s left hand and slid the ring onto his finger, “take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Jamie stared at the ring on his finger in a tender kind of awe, as if it were the most precious thing in the world…then transferred the gaze—unchanging—to my face. There were tears in his eyes under furrowed brows and his adam’s apple was bobbing madly. He opened his mouth as if to say something…but couldn’t manage it. He swallowed, raised my hand to his lips, and kissed it, long enough that two warm droplets fell lightly onto my skin.

We were both practically falling apart by the end.

All the usual words had been spoken, and Father Gentry smiled at the pair of us, gesturing that we might proceed with the addition we had discussed.

Jamie took my right hand in his left, pressing his scarred palm to mine. Both crying freely, we choked out the words together, the ones that we hadn’t been able to finish the last time we’d spoken them: when we’d bled together at the time of our parting.

You are Blood of my Blood, and Bone of my Bone.
I give you my Body, that we Two might be One.
I give you my Spirit, ’til our Life shall be Done

“….and forever thereafter,” Jamie whispered, streaming eyes burning into mine.

At the moment the joyful permission was given, my lawfully wedded husband took my face directly in both his shaking hands and kissed me, intense with love. I let my bridal accoutrements fall so I might hold him likewise, pulling away from the kiss only long enough to vow hoarsely back: “Forever thereafter, Jamie.”
Honeymoon

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the seven sleepers’ den?

Jamie’s voice drifted through the open doorway on the cool, salt-thick breeze of dawn. The syllables came to me soft, but deep and rich and low, sweet like warmed honey, filling me with such a blessed stillness that I lay there in bed for some time…just listening…letting the words lap up over me…

’Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.

If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, ’twas but a dream of thee.

Without seam or pause, the stillness evaporated, replaced by an imperative to touch, to rise up and ground the dream to some reality. Some being.

Jamie was standing at the railing looking out at the sea, which was just starting to be tinged with the pinks and golds of sunrise. The breeze ruffled his hair and the hem of his robe.

The serenity of him, of the scene, and of John Donne’s words spoken in broad, clear Scots, took my breath away.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,

Which watch not one another out of fear;

For love, all love of other sights controls,

And makes one little room an everywhere.

He knew I was there.

As I caught my breath and stepped out onto the balcony, he turned, smiling, and took me to him. He was cold to the touch, the early morning air hanging chilled in the fabric of his robe and in his skin, as it was in mine.

We clung to one another, feeling the heat build between us as he turned us to the water, continuing the verse.

Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,

Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,

Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

He brought up a hand to cup the back of my head. I tightened my arms around his waist, closing my
eyes and feeling the words resonate in his chest over the cadence of his heartbeat.

*My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,*

*And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;*

*Where can we find two better hemispheres,*

*Without sharp north, without declining west?*

*Whatever dies, was not mixed equally.*

*If our two loves be one, or, thou and I*

*Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.*

The utter peace of the verse surrounded us, wrapping around us like a plaid; a garment worn and battered, yes, but *strong*, impervious to fear, and keeping in—like body heat—the surety of being equally-mixed and un-endingly *loved*.

He kissed the top of my head. “D’ye ken…I didna *once* think of poetry after you had gone?” His voice was quavering a bit now, sounding small. “Tried just to…*get by* from day to day… feel as little as possible…close myself off from it…from me…”

I knew. Knew the emptiness. The *fear* of that emptiness. The sense that if I opened myself to acknowledge it, looming dark and malicious over my shoulder, it would open like a maw and swallow me, drowning me in the pain of what had been lost. Only Brianna had kept me alive.

”*Now*, though,” he said, drawing me even tighter against him, “it’s…its like I’ve such a vast flood of feeling that my own words willna do, and I must have the words of some great man to help carry the immensity of joy within me. I couldna keep it in if I tried.”

“*And now good-morrow to our waking souls,*” I whispered, feeling the glow of dawn both in my heart and warm on my cheeks as the sun rose higher and higher over the shoreline, illuminating the rugged beauty of a new day.

He leaned against me with a contented sigh. “‘*Tis a beautiful spot, this,”* he said quietly, gesturing to the lawn of the hotel, the beach, and the gleaming water beyond. “I’m glad ye brought us here. Its… verra peaceful.”

Getting here had been anything *but* peaceful. It had, frankly, been a *nightmare* from start to finish. As soon as we had left the church, Brianna had thrown a Grade-A, Double-Duty Tantrum (the cause of which she would not deign to disclose, despite much desperate wheeling), which had made the business of getting all the Frasers (*yes, Frasers!*), Mrs Byrd, and all our baggage loaded into the car a harrowing ordeal for all concerned. To make matters worse, there had been been a considerable amount of weekend traffic on the long drive from Boston to our destination on Cape Cod; we’d driven past the hotel three times before finding it at last; our rooms weren’t ready when we’d arrived, and so we’d had to pass time in the stuffy lobby with a fussy almost-two-year-old making her displeasure known. She’d whined all through the process of unpacking her into Mrs. Byrd’s room, getting her fed and changed for bed, reading her a story (twice), and making our guilty escape to the room next door.

But the moment the door closed behind us, our *little room* had indeed become an *everywhere*. Our coupling had held none of the carnal frenzy of the past several days. We were slow, quiet, taking
notice of every move, every breath, every inch of one another’s body, every moment in the moonlit dark. We had made love, in every sense.

Jamie picked me gently off my feet and walked us over to the wicker settee. We settled onto it, my legs stretched down the length as I leaned my head against Jamie’s shoulder. One warm arm wrapped sturdily around my back, holding me to him. The hand of the other held and caressed mine, tracing the lines of each finger. I smiled at the sight. “It looks strange to see a wedding ring on your hand.”

He gave a smiling *mmmm* in acknowledgement, raising his left hand and looking it over contentedly. “I hadna remembered that men wore wedding rings in your time. Ought to have, though,” he said. “Frank had one. I ought to have remembered and seen to it before the ceremony.”

“I’m delighted I was able to surprise you,” I said genuinely, also genuinely suppressing the stab I’d experienced at the shock that Frank still wore our wedding ring nearly two years after the divorce. I cleared my throat. “You don’t mind? Wearing it, I mean?”

“Oh, *mo chridhe*, not at all, it’s…” He sounded rather awed, and then furrowed his brow as if in sudden annoyance. “Come to think of it, I’m now fair fashed that men *dinna* wear them in my time!”

“Well,” I said fairly, “I suppose it’s expensive to always purchase two rings, and of the two parties, the woman is likely more appreciative of jewelry…AND the man more inclined to mark his *personal property* for all to see,” I said wryly.

Jamie chuckled but took my hand in his, squeezing, and there was no humor in his voice when at last he spoke. “It’s my *honor* to wear your ring, Claire. To choose to be marked as yours, as you choose to be marked as mine. I’ve worn the badge in my heart always, but…” he held up our hands, “‘tis a different thing to be able to see it. Tis *right*.”

“I…had something engraved on it for you.” I felt suddenly unspeakably shy and I looked down. I wasn’t accustomed to being the one initiating romantic gestures, and I experienced an insane urge to run and hide, certain that I’d done it completely wrong.

Jamie looked surprised, but undoubtedly pleased as he carefully prised the band from his finger, holding it up in the light of sunrise. Then his face slackened and he made a small sound as he read the words.

I had had to shamelessly badger the jeweler’s assistant into completing the engraving on short notice, but they had done it. Just three words, in a simple script: *a thousand more*.

Jamie’s eyes were glassy and very blue indeed as he looked up, his voice thick with feeling. “Have ye ever looked on the inside of your own band, *mo chridhe*?”

I shook my head, puzzled. “Until yesterday for the ceremony, I’d never once taken it off.”

Pulling the silver interlace ring gently from my finger, he held it up for me to see the words etched there: *Da mi basia mille*.

“Oh, *sweetheart*…” I breathed, tearing up just as he had.

If I had only looked sooner…been able to see that one last kiss from Jamie on my finger….

“Great minds think alike,” I said lamely, trying to find *something* to say to prevent me from breaking down in sobs on the spot.
He replaced his ring and took my right hand. “I dinna ken about great minds…but minds that belong to one another… aye, those do.” He made to slip the band back on my finger, but I pulled gently away from him and offered him my left hand instead.

Jamie cocked his head to the side. “Your ring was always on your right hand, was it not?”

“It was,” I confirmed, proffering the correct hand again firmly. “But you placed it on my left yesterday as the priest instructed…and that’s where it belongs, now.”

*Because this time, you’re the only man in my heart.*

He reverently slid the ring up my left ring finger, bent, and kissed it. “Thank you,” I heard him whisper, his breath soft against my skin.

A flock of white pelicans suddenly swooped low overhead and we marveled at them, admiring the huge, strong bodies, so gawky in themselves but unbelievably graceful in flight.

The strong, graceful body underneath me shifted, too, bringing me more comfortably against his chest. He sighed, a warm, cozy sound, and kissed my forehead, his voice suddenly alert and direct. “When we return to Boston from our–what was it ye called it? Honey–?”

“*Honeymoon,*” I supplied with a smile.

“–from our *honeymoon,* aye,” he laughed, charmed by the new word, “I should like to begin thinking on what it is I might do for a profession.”

*Blast it all.*

I suppose it had to come up eventually.

“You know you don’t have to work, don’t you?” I said slowly with careful casualness. “I do make enough for us to live on—modestly, of course—but we won’t go hungry.”

“Aye, I do ken it, and I dinna wish ye to think I’m no’ appreciative…” he said being rather careful in his words, himself, “but work isna only about money, aye? It’s feeling like ye have a purpose, as well. Or…maybe it isna purpose, precisely, for it isna that it must be something grand, it’s only–”

“–only that there’s pleasure to be had in pursuing something you enjoy?” I said without hesitation.

He nodded, and gave a small smile. “You of all people would ken that, I suppose.”

“And, erm…speaking of *me of all people*…I do mean to continue working at the hospital, regardless of…”

I trailed off lamely, but Jamie only snorted. “Sassenach, I long ago gave up any hope of dissuading ye against your profession. And now, I wouldna even dream of it.”

I squeezed his hand in thanks. I hadn’t thought he would put up a fuss, but two years back in the twentieth century had made me wary. “I wish more people nowadays were as open minded regarding women in the workplace.”

His eyes held a faint twinkle. “You’ve taught me well, love. And aye, I ken what ye mean. I’d have thought it were illegal for a woman to have a profession from the way folk turned up their noses at the notion.”

“Yes, unfortunately it is very fashionable at the moment for women to keep house, throw parties, and
mind the children. All well and good, but I don’t see why that should be all I do.”

“No reason except small-mindedness,” he said seriously. “I’ve seen what you’re capable of. It wouldn’a be right to keep sick folk from your talents.”

Despite myself, I actually blushed. “I’m only a nurse, here, hardly doing anything groundbreaking or even anything critical like battlefield surgeries, but–”

“Doesn’a matter where or when or how damaged your patients are, Claire,” he said, cutting me off. “You’ve a gift for healing and ye must share it. I envy you, in fact.”

“Do you indeed?”

“Aye, I do.” He relaxed his grip on me a bit to lean more fully against the back of the sofa. “Ye ken precisely what it is you’re meant to be doing, and I ken what a comfort that knowledge can be. I used to have it. Was trained for a laird and a soldier most of my life,” he said, absently stroking the lines of my radius and ulna and gazing out at the sea. “Dinna suppose there’s much in the way of those for me here, though.”

“Vacancies for lairds are rather thin on the ground, nowadays and in these parts,” I said, with a grin. Then my heart sank with realization. I cleared my throat. “There…are soldiers, still, to be sure,” I said. My heart was choked with mounting panic…at the memories of what twentieth century warfare was like.

Jamie heard it and his arms tightened around me. “I’m good at soldiering…but I’ve done wi’ war. If ever it should come to it that I must fight, I will do my duty, but I willna seek it out again in my life. That I swear to you.”

“Thank God,” I exhaled, though my mind was already beginning to puzzle through alternatives in case he should suddenly change his mind and bundle off to an enlistment station bound for Korea. “You’re quite good at languages and figures. Might teaching or scholarship appeal to you?”

“Aye, perhaps…” He nodded slowly, but his brows were furrowed. “But surely, all of my knowledge will be antiquated, now, will it not? Unless it were Latin, or some other topic that willna have changed o’er much, I dinna see how I could with confidence pretend to be fit to instruct others.”

“That’s a fair point,” I said consideringly, though in truth, the thought had occurred to me even before he’d said it.

We were on somewhat unsteady ground, here, and I felt I needed to tread carefully. Jamie Fraser was accustomed to living in a world in which his talents and capabilities were well above the norm. He had been born to privilege, had filled positions of power, and had, as a whole, been fairly goddamned impressive for all of this life, seaworthiness and musicality notwithstanding. Here, though, there weren’t many (if any!) professions that he would be able to enter into without playing a considerable amount of catch-up from a qualifications or knowledge-base standpoint.

I was considerably relieved, then, that he was already anticipating these difficulties. It needed to be Jamie that precluded himself from various paths and pursuits, rather than me. I wouldn’t have him thinking that I deemed him anything less than what he desired to be.

“How about public service?” I said with sudden inspiration. “The police force or the fire department? It would be saving people, bringing wrongdoers to justice, that sort of thing!”

Yes, there was potential there! What could possibly be more fulfilling for Jamie than hero-work? He
would need at least a high-school diploma, and his citizenship status might possibly be a hindrance, but that could be managed, I thought, with naturalization processes and some classes at a local college. Jamie was bright and would learn quickly, if he set his mind to it.

“You would like that kind of work, wouldn’t you?” I prodded.

“I dinna think so, no.”

“Why ever not?”

My incredulous tone startled him, and a look of embarrassed shame crossed his face. “You’ll perhaps think me most grossly altered, Claire,” he said, speaking haltingly.

“I won’t, I promise,” I said, hastily trying to retrench. “I didn’t mean to judge or imply anything, Jamie, truly, I just was… surprised!” I said. “It seems very like what you did before, with different tools and means, surely, but—”

“Aye, but when I did such things, before, it was for folk that I cared about. My men; my tenants; my family; my countrymen. Here, though…” He turned my face gently toward him, and I could see the intensity in his eyes. “Here, for me, there is only you and Brianna. Only you two in all the world I would wish to protect.” He kissed me. “I’m good at seeking justice. But for all my life, I’ve longed for a world in which it didna fall to me to see it done. Now that I find myself in one…”

“It must feel a terrible burden gone from your shoulders.”

“Aye,” he said, his shoulders seeming to relax even as he said it. “I feel…It’s almost as if I’ve cheated my fate in some way and I shall have to pay for my good fortune later…but my heart is verra light indeed at the prospect. I shall revel in the gift as long as God allows it to be so.”

On further reflection, I could see that modern public service was probably not a good fit for Jamie, after all. To be so confined by bureaucracy, beholden to the ultimate authority of regulation and red tape over his own judgement and principles? No, surely he would become discouraged and jaded over time, in that kind of environment.

“I think that work out of doors is what I should like.” He looked down at me a little sheepishly. “I know such things likely willna be prestigious…but it will feel most like home. I worked at the grounds at Oxford for those several weeks, and I enjoyed it. Doesna have to be that precisely, but… Simple. Honest. Work where I willna have to always be wondering if I’m going about it wrong. I ken fine that I might learn any profession I wished, were I willing to put myself to the task of the necessary learning, but….” He nodded to himself in growing conviction, “…but to the greatest extent possible, I wish to have a quiet life, where I might be in the open air, work wi’ my hands, and be there wi’ you and the bairn as much as I might. Does that seem reasonable?” he asked seriously, looking suddenly as though he had asked to be handed a million dollars and a penthouse flat.

“Nothing could be better.”

Speculation about in what arena he might find such work, though, was cut short by a sudden, gleeful exclamation of “MAMA!!” for Bree and Mrs Byrd had appeared on the neighboring balcony, separated from us by a ten-foot gap and three stories’ drop.

“Why, good morning, sweetheart!” I called, sitting up tall the better to see her.

“MamaMamaMamaDaaaaaa!” Bree squealed excitedly in Mrs Byrd’s arms, leaning forward and gripping the railing as if to pull herself over it.
Mrs Byrd stepped firmly back to keep Bree from falling over. “No, no, sweetie, you don’t have wings, and Mama and Da are having some alone time right now.”

She made as if to go back inside, but Jamie quickly said, “We’d be glad of her company for a spell, if ye wouldna mind bringing her over?”

Bree, however, did not understand and began to wail as Mrs. Byrd moved toward the door and we began to disappear from Brianna’s view.

“It’s alright, a leannan,” Jamie called, “Mrs Byrd is only bringing ye—”

But for the second day in a row, Bree was in no mood to be reasoned with. She put up an unholy wailing of “Mama” and “Da” that could be heard through the walls and down the halls all the way from their balcony to our door. When I opened it, her sobs shifted instantly into tears of relief, she apparently completely overcome by the emotional agony of the past 15 seconds’ separation.

“It’s alright, baby, it’s alright,” I crooned, half-laughing as I thanked Mrs. Byrd and walked back out to our balcony.

“D…Da?” Bree asked, between distraught hiccups.

I stepped through the door and turned so that she could see Jamie on the settee. “Da is right there, lovie. Shhh, it’s alright, Bree,” I said, laughing in earnest as she absolutely fell apart at the sight of her father.

I sat down beside Jamie, Bree curled up on my chest. Jamie brought me into the crook of his shoulder and stroked Bree’s hair. “Aye, it’s been a verra hard morning for ye, a chuisle.” He smiled sweetly at me, saying confidentially, “Still, it’s quite nice to be wanted, aye?”

“Well, give it a few more days like yesterday and you might start to feel otherwise, but…yes, it is nice.” Lord, did I know it. It had been just the two of us from the beginning, Bree and me, and being wanted and loved, even by a small baby who didn’t know any better, had meant a great deal to me.

I kissed Bree’s head and murmured soft things, but she was still disconsolate.

“D’ye see the sea, a ruaidh?” Jamie asked, pitching his voice high to distract her. “See out there, all the water?”

Bree looked back over her shoulder. “Sim?” she said sharply, suddenly straightening in anticipation, tears forgotten.

Swim, I mouthed with a grin.

Jamie thumbed the tears from her cheeks. “Aye, I suppose we might swim, at that…if Mama says it’s alright.”

Bree turned a steely eye on me, daring me to say no.

I laughed. “As long as you’re with your Da, yes, you can swim.”

Brianna nodded once. “Sim now.” It was not a request.

“Surely ye wouldna subject your poor old Da to the rigors of swimming in a great, raging sea wi’out having his breakfast first?” Jamie put on a tragic face at the anticipated hardship, making me laugh.

Bree, however, raised a magnanimous hand, dismissing her father’s distress with a mumbled but
unmistakable, “Minnafash, sacknap.”

Jamie and I both burst out laughing at that. He plucked her from my arms and kissed both pudgy cheeks. “Ohhh, we’ve begotten a proper Scot, after all, mo ghraidh.”

“We’ll see about that,” I said bemused. “I think we’ll both have to work hard to keep her from growing up a fully-fledged American.”

Jamie looked up, surprised. “Is she an American, then? Though neither parent has American blood?”

“She was born on American soil, so legally, she is a citizen, yes. And there isn’t really such thing as American blood, anyway. The country was founded in 1776 after a revolution against the king. It’s a republic of sorts, so lineage has little to do with it, in theory.”

He made a sound of appreciative fascination, rising with Bree in his arms. “I should like to learn more about it.”

“Well, Massachusetts is a prime place for that. But in any case,” I said teasingly. “I do think Scots will be rather low in Brianna’s cultural pecking order. American first, English second, and perhaps Scottish to follow.”

He offered me a hand to help me up, grinning. “Whatever ye say, Sacknap.”
By the Seaside

*There we are, wee one. Down we go,* Jamie said to his daughter in slow, distinct Gaelic. He knelt slightly—keeping one arm under her bum and the other wrapped tight around her middle—so she could splash her legs in the cool surf as he described their surroundings in his native language. She would need to learn, herself, so best to let her hear it spoken regularly while she was still small. She seemed to like the sound of the unfamiliar words and spoke animatedly back in a language equally unintelligible to him.

Switching back to English, he craned his neck to better see her flushed face. “Does the water feel nice on your toes, *mo chridhe*?”

In response, she squealed a delighted string of syllables in which he thought he caught *aye, toesies,* and *hertlfnou.*

It was only midmorning but already hot as hell, the July sun beating down bright and clear, sparkling off the water. The beach was already alive, as well, dotted with merrymakers spread out on towels, reading under great parasols, or splashing about in the water as he and the lass were, though none of them were close enough to examine carefully. Claire and Mrs. Byrd were nowhere to be seen, as yet, apparently still putting the finishing touches on the picnic lunch. They’d asked (both rather desperately) if he might take the lass to the shore in the meantime to give them a moment’s peace, for God’s sake.

“A wee terror, ye are, and no mistake, Brianna,” he told her with a wide smile. He supposed she couldn’t really be expected to be otherwise, given her parentage. He himself had been a right devil as a boy, to be sure, and he couldn’t fathom that wee Claire Beauchamp had been anything close to a docile child either. Brianna had calmed, though, as soon as she’d clapped eyes on the water, seemingly enraptured just to be in its presence, and they played happily in the surf.

Jamie felt just that wee bit foolish in the short, green breeks that Claire had given him. The fabric was like nothing he’d ever felt before, unless it were snake scales or some other unnervingly cool, slippery thing. In his time, bathing for pleasure was enjoyed by many, but no special clothing existed for the purpose, at least not in Scotland, where stripping to the skin and plunging into river and loch was a simple part of life, be it for pleasure or to bathe. Here and now, though, being seen in public in the nude simply wasn’t done. Aye, well, and if the price for safety and plenty and family is that I must keep my privates private at all times, so be it, and gladly! Jamie thought.

Brianna’s own swimming costume was of the same slick material, but in a bright blue with white spots, a kind of short frock that stopped just below the hips with a watching wee hat to shade her face. It was quite a gaudy ensemble, but—to borrow one of Mrs. Byrd’s favorite terms—exceedingly cute.

“Come on, then, wee bluebird,” Jamie said, straightening and walking them several yards back toward to the beach. He sat down in the shallows, the lass perched on his outstretched legs. It was oddly delightful, feeling the sand recede beneath him as the tide pulled outward, as if to root him into the very ground. “Alright, Bree, here comes the water,” he said dramatically, seeing the corresponding wavelet approaching. “Ready?’

She cackled like a wee fiend as it struck her in the belly. “Um’ginn!!!” she shrieked, looking up at him expectantly.

“Oh, I think Da can arrange that,” he said, raising his eyebrows. The next wave broke against her
just as she turned forward, making her erupt with shrieks of equal shock and joy.

He laughed along with her, infected by her unhindered delight, and—ridiculous as it was—unspeakably moved that she thought him able to control the tides for her. He would do it, were he able, and far more, for her sake.

“D’ye ken how much I love you, my Brianna?” he asked softly, treasuring the weight of her in his arms.

“NO!” she piped automatically, her usual answer whenever a question was asked, the sweet, contrary thing.

“I love you…more than my own life.”

“M’okay!”

Jamie couldn’t help but laugh at her flippancy. He kissed her temple, then allowed her to slide off his lap. The water came halfway up her chubby, little legs, and she crouched to smack the surface of the water with both hands. She giggled and jumped up and down and turned to face him. “Sim SIM sim!”

“Aye,’ he said, grinning fondly, “you’re swimming verra well indeed, a leannan.”

She grinned, clapped her hands, babbled something, and turned to resume her swimming.

Jamie leaned back on his hands, watching her. How could it possibly have been less than a week since he’d met her? Naught but a few days since the first time he’d held her in his arms? He had loved her for far longer, of course; since she was no more than a speculation amid the turmoil of war; the thought that Clare’s breasts were just that bit swollen; the knowledge that yet another missed day had passed in her courses. He’d loved this child through pain and fever; cold and loneliness; the mere fact—hope—that somewhere, in some time she existed, had been enough. Or…at least it had been infinitely better than the agony of her loss.

He hadn’t known, of course, that she was she. Then, she had been Brian, the wee lad that had comforted his lonely hours, happily playing in his thoughts and dreams; the son that—as he grew—would be a balm for Claire, the two of them watching over one another, since Jamie himself could not. And yet, somehow in his mind, there was no distinction between that child and this. Brian was Brianna, and she was he. His child. Claire’s child. That child.

A shrill cry of fear brought him jarringly back to his senses and the world shifted into terror as Jamie realized that Brianna was too far from him, nearly twenty paces out, and a swell as high as his navel about to crash overtop her.

His limbs seemed to go to liquid even as he tried to rise, and his horror was absolute as she fell backward and was sucked under before his eyes into the dark water.

It might have only taken a few seconds…but it seemed hours.

Hours of panic.

Days of desperate struggle.

Staggering, groping blindly in the roiling, dark water.

….and then his hand closed around a foot and he had her, pulled her up out of the water. Her hat
was gone and her eyes were closed, mouth open and sagging. He turned her over his arm and pounded her back hard, but she made not a move or a sound.

Oh, Jesus

Mary, Michael, and Bride hear us

God, please—

She suddenly coughed and shuddered in his arms and Jamie gasped deep along with her. “Breathe in, a chuisle, breathe, aye that’s it,” he managed to say, though he could barely breathe himself.

She was twitching, taking in shallow, sporadic gulps of air. The wracked sound tore his guts out. “Bree, say something!” he begged. He kept pounding her back, watching in helpless terror as her face turned redder and redder, she unable to speak or get s deep breath. “Dog? Book? Christ, lass, say—say something?—say something for Da, please?”

Nothing.

Then a huge cough, a long breath and a weak, “Da, peas.”

Jamie closed his eyes and sobbed out a prayer of thanks as he brought her upright against his chest, rubbing her back with shaking hand. She seemed merely dazed, coughing and rubbing her eyes. Seeing his face, though, contorted with emotion and relief, the lass started to cry.

“No, no, you’re alright, sweetheart, just…just fine.” He clutched her fiercely to his shoulder, shaking. He didn’t want her to see him cry.

Safer.

It was safer, here, but not safe.

He could feel the current strong against his legs, the one that had tried to pull her out to sea.

He felt the thoughts reorient in his mind, clicking into place.

You’ve gotten slow.

You’ve gotten lazy.

You must still be vigilant to keep them safe.

Anything could take them from you. Anything.

Vigilant.

You must keep them safe, James Fraser.

“And what in GOD’s name do ye think you’re wearing??”

He’d thought that the wee, flimsy frock Claire had sported in the hotel room was her bathing costume, and he’d had to grit his teeth to keep from saying anything about the scandalous look of that. But when she and Mrs. Byrd at long last appeared (the latter scooping up Bree at once and
heading for the tidal pools, tutting over the loss of Bree’s hat to a rogue gull), Claire had laid down her towel, knelt, and whipped the dress right up over her head—nearly giving him an apoplexy—to reveal the far more startling garment underneath. Garments, that is, with a strip of flesh showing between navel and breasts, the snow-white fabric clinging to every inch and curve and cranny of her so that from a distance, she appeared to be....

He hadn’t meant to bellow so loudly or so violently at her. The look of shock and—oh, Christ—fear on her face sent a stab through him, the urge to apologize, but anger welled up at once and obliterated any such instinct. He snatched a towel and threw it forcefully around her shoulders.

Anger flashed hot across her own face and she threw off the towel at once with a fearsome, “Not bloody likely!”

Jamie stood staring down at her, seething.

She seethed right back, steel in her voice and a dangerous glint in her eye. “Sit. Down.”

He sat. Not at once. But he sat, fists clenched.

They sat in silence for over a minute.

She was holding a wide-brimmed hat and was slowly, absently moving her hands around the brim like a Van steering wheel. When she spoke, it was clear she was choosing her words very carefully. “People dress differently, now, Jamie—”

He glared at her, jaw clenched. “Ye think I dinna ken that?”

“—and this,” she said, still patient and measured, indicating her attire (lack of it), “is not considered at all inappropriate.”

“Not considered—?” He swore violently in Gaelic. “Claire, I can see your nipples and the crack of your arse and every damn part of ye! How is that not—?” He scoffed in frustration. “God, would ye please just cover yourself? Damn you, woman!”

She gritted her teeth, hard, tilting her head slightly but still not looking directly at him. “I understand this is difficult for you, but—”

“Oh, ye do, do ye?”

“Yes, I bloody do,” she snapped, loudly, throwing down the hat and shifting to face him. “I know it isn’t as if you can flip a switch and suddenly know, let alone accept all the ways things are done, now.” She threw up her hands. “But I was born in this generation, Jamie, and I think I ought to know better than you how to conduct myself within it!”

“So in your generation, it’s appropriate to make every man that lays eyes on ye wish to—?” He broke off with a sound of disgust.

God, he wanted her so badly he’d contemplated having her right there on the sand, and red-hot fury burned in him at the thought of every other man in sight thinking of doing the same.

“Jamie?” she said flatly, interrupting his internal furor.

“Yes, wife?” he sneered.

That was a mistake. Her eyes flashed dangerously and he thought for a moment that she would go
for his throat. But she gritted her teeth once more and spoke slowly with an approximation of
calm. “What I think I heard you imply is that back when I was habitually packaged in layers of wool
and petticoats from head to toe, you—and any other men you’d care to mention—felt no lustful
thoughts toward me because my limbs were properly covered up. Is that right?”

Jamie growled.

“Is. that. right?” she repeated, staring him down and clipping each word dangerously.

“Ye ken fine that it isna so,” he muttered.

“Well, then.” she said brightly, eyebrows raised in defiance, “can we agree that my clothing choices
have no effect whatsoever on whether or not men lust after me?”

Damnable mule of a woman.

“But that doesna mean ye must go prancing about encouraging them to—”

Suddenly, the whispers hit him in the back of the head like poisoned darts.

“—scars?—”

“—Like he went through a meat grinder—”

“—Going about like that in public—”

“—shameless—children about—”

Jamie felt the blood drain instantly from his face.

Claire glared over her shoulder at the two women who had been passing behind them. They were
startled to realize they’d been overheard. They mumbled mortified apologies and sped quickly on
their way down the beach.

Jamie reached numbly for his shirt, his wame clenched tight with shame.

“Don’t you even think about it,” Claire said sharply, snatching it away before he could pick it up.

“The scars didna even cross my mind, this morning,” he said, embarrassed shame rippling through
him and making him lower his eyes. “They havena, in fact, since I found you and Bree….You
should have told me that I ought to keep them hidden, Claire. I’d have listened.”

“No, I shouldn’t have.” She took his hand and squeezed hard, speaking intently and trying to get him
to meet her eye. “People are always going to be nasty and inconsiderate and just plain stupid, but it
isn’t your job to dress to their small-minded failings and sensitivities…just like it isn’t mine.”

Well, that was him neatly and properly trussed, was it not?

But, Christ...you dinna understand, mo ghraidh.

He’d promised her on the floor of the sitting room that he would be a good man and he had tried
very hard to make a good start of it. He’d faced things that alarmed him and pushed onward each
day, doing as best he might to learn, to adapt for the sake of Brianna and Claire. He’d sworn to
himself to be a proper husband…

...but how could the world have changed so drastically that it was now wrong of him to protect his
wife's virtue from those that would do her harm?

“I only want ye to be safe, Sassenach. You and the wean.” He closed his eyes for a moment and swallowed, speaking low. “Were something to…If ever any danger were to…”

*I should never be able to forgive myself. Never.*

“I wasn’t altogether happy, but I did manage most of my life here without you, you know. Oh, blast, that isn’t what I—” Seeing the look on his face, she winced and made a gah sound of regret and frustration, scrubbing her hands over her face. She breathed heavily for a moment and then looked up at him. “I only need you to trust my experience, Jamie. I need you to trust me when I promise you that a bikini is not going to put me in danger.”

He could hear the strain and desperation in her voice, the need to be heard and believed. He softened and reached for her hand. “I do trust you, Claire.”

She gave a small sound of relief and moved closer to him to wrap her arms around his waist. He held her tight in return and closed his eyes.

*Just let me take care of you.*

*Let me protect you.*

*Please, just...need me, Claire,*

“I know you’ll always keep me safe, Jamie,” came her voice against his chest. Quiet. Sincere. “The dangers are less common, now...but I know.”

He leaned down and kissed her slowly. Thanks. Apology. And promise.

When she broke away, her eyes were sparkling. “*Puisque tu m’aimes.*” [Because you love me]

“Aye, always that,” he said, sighing a little as he released her. He looked out across the beach and gave a dry smile in the direction of the gossiping women in the distance. “Did ye plan that little encounter yourself, then?”

She grinned. “No, but it worked out rather well, didn’t it?”

“Like a proper wee pantomime.”

She continued smiling as she turned back to her collection of basket and bags, unpacking the astonishing array of paraphernalia that was apparently needed for the occasion of sitting by the water.

He watched her intently, taking her in, finally saying, “You *do* look verra bonny in the wee *Biquini, Sassenach.***

She truly did. It showed her figure to astoundingly good advantage and the white fabric made her cream-fair skin look positively bronzed in a very novel but undoubtedly becoming way.

She blushed and beamed, smoothing the fabric at her hips. “I was feeling rather nervous about putting on a bathing suit at all.”

“Why should ye be nervous?”

She made a vague gesture toward her person, pulling *Plastic* pitcher and cups from the basket. “Oh,
the various ravages of pregnancy, you know. I’m not exactly Rita Hayworth, these days.”

“I dinna ken who Mrs. Hayworth is, but I can tell ye for certain that she canna hold a candle to my wife.”

Claire raised her eyebrows. “She’s a voluptuous movie star generally considered by the public to be one of most sexually attractive women alive. Or she was during the war, at least.”

He didn’t have the faintest idea what a Movie Star was, but her meaning was clear and he snorted. “The general public hasna seen Claire Fraser.”

“You’re hopeless,” she said, trying not to smile but failing.

“Aye, and not a thing to be done about it,” he agreed, laughing as he poured out water for them both. Christ, it was hot.

She rifled in her bag yet again and came out with a brown bottle, holding it out to him. “Will you rub me down?”

He had just taken a swallow and promptly choked. “Beg pardon?”

She laughed and proffered it again. “Will you rub this lotion into my skin, I mean?”

Jamie stared at the bottle in his hand then looked up at her skeptically. “...Why?”

“It’s a special salve that prevents sunburn. Keeps the harmful rays from damaging the skin.”

“Oh, aye?” he said, fascinated. He tried reading the inscriptions on the bottle but it was naught but gibberish. SPF. Oxybenzone.

She knelt and rested back on her haunches expectantly. “I’ve got my legs and front taken care of, if you could just help with my back and shoulders and arms?”

She showed him how to squeeze the sides to dispense the stuff into his palm. He got on his knees behind her and gingerly began rubbing it into the backs of her arms. The potion stank in an unnatural way, but she was warm to the touch from the sun, and the greasy stuff slid across her contours in a very sensual fashion.

He cast his eyes from side to side, muttering, “Jesus, I feel a right lecher doing this to ye in public.”

“You’re not being lecherous, I promise,” she laughed. “There’s plenty of other people about doing the exact same thing!”

“Aye, but not everyone has their arse done up like a French cake and staring me in the face.”

She looked over her shoulder, her lips pursed and quivering. “If you stop staring at it, I daresay it’ll stop staring at you.”

He finished with her arms and began rubbing her shoulders. He couldn’t stop staring at it. The clinging of the fabric perfectly sculpted out the rounded shapes of…

Jamie put one hand on her hip as if to steady himself, the other now rubbing the strip of flesh at the small of her back as he leaned in just behind her ear. “D’ye ken what I’m thinking right now, Sassenach?”

She heard the tone of his voice, stiffened, and, despite the heat of the day, shivered. “What’s…
what’s that?”

“I’m thinking…” He slid his hands around to the front of her body, massaging the tender, exposed skin of her abdomen, just below her breasts…then moving lower down. “…how much I should like to slip my hand down the front of this ridiculous thing…and give the passersby something properly shocking to talk about.”

He nudged a fingertip—only one—just barely—under the waistband.

*She gasped*
“Do you know?” I said (well, gasped) against Jamie’s mouth, “we’ve made love hundreds of times and not once have you ever had to remove anything from my nether regions.”

“And I dinna like the experience one bit,” he snarled darkly, fumbling with the elastic waistband of my white bikini and slipping his hand down to grab my arse, hard.

“Oh no, indeed?” I said, grinning, before grabbing the back of his neck and pulling his mouth hard down to mine again, “You’ve a wee friend, there, saying otherwise.” His erection, though not wee, was pushing insistently into my belly in a most pleasing, urgent fashion, made even more urgent as our mouths locked together again.

“My wee friend,” he said, pulling back for a moment, “isna in a mood to be principled on the matter.” I felt his hand and arm slip upward and free of the briefs simultaneous with his teeth latching into the tender skin of my neck.

“I suppose, to their credit, briefs do build a rather pleasant sense of susp—OH—oh, Jamie, keep—!” His newly- liberated hand had plunged immediately down the front of the bikini and he was playing me masterfully with strong, precise strokes. I grabbed his upper arms and pulled myself up on tiptoes to rock even harder against him. “Oh Jesus, God, don’t st—don’t bloody st—!”

He said nothing, but grinned triumphantly and increased his speed, making human speech quite impossible to contemplate.

We had left a hastily-scrawled note to Mrs Byrd pinned to the picnic basket saying that she was not to worry, and that we’d only had to pop up to the room for some forgotten necessity. So necessary had been that necessity, though, that we didn’t make it even remotely close to our room. We all but sprinted into the first reasonably secluded spot that presented itself, which, as it turns out, had been the hotel laundry facility.

It was a series of rooms adjacent to the main building, a warren of sorts accessible from the sidelawn that had grown piecemeal over the years as the hotel grew. Dark-paneled and smelling of soap, it was like a cavern, cool, inviting… and hopefully private. Hand in hand and gasping with guilty laughter, we’d run back through this labyrinth, blessedly not encountering any staff along the way, until finally we had reached the backmost room. This was little more than a closet containing shelves and a folding table, but we immediately agreed that it was more than sufficient. And by agreed, that is to say that Jamie had pushed me bodily into the very darkest corner, bent back my head, and had gotten right down to the business at—well, at hand.

His skin was deliciously hot and dry from the sun, and I could feel grains of sand running under my hands as I gripped his back and shoulders to move myself in rhythm with him. While I agreed with Jamie generally that leaving one’s privates en plein air was preferable in day-to-day life and for the ease of sexual encounters with one’s spouse, the added pressure from the angles the tight garment necessitated were undoubtedly novel; novel enough to make spots appear behind my eyes and incoherent sounds to escape from my lips. Well, sauce for the goose, lad… I got his trunks pushed smartly down to his ankles. He was hot and rigid and he growled low in his throat as I grasped him and began stroking him in rhythm with his own prodigious efforts. This only stoked him further. Before long, he had me humming like a live wire and I could feel the sparking surge building. “Jamiie?” I groaned.
He didn’t need telling twice. He shoved my briefs down my thighs and onto the floor. Removing the top, however, appeared to be too time-consuming for his designs. He swooped me up off the floor and onto a pile of clean, folded towels on the table. Aligning himself, quivering, he met my eye for one brief second. That look—eyes and eyebrows almost angry, but coupled with that exultant, crooked grin—did me in. I flung my arms around his neck and we met with an intensity that made us both cry out in equal shock, satisfaction, and hunger.

The table beneath me must have been of remarkable quality despite its humble purpose, for it made not a squeak or groan despite the rather violent encounter taking place upon its boards. I made a vague mental note to write an approving letter to the management for their stringent attention to standards…and also to leave a sizable tip for the laundry staff, whose work we were systematically counteracting on several levels.

Just as we were nearing the fireworks of the program, there came the sharp click of a door and voices near at hand as two people entered the adjoining room of our closet.

I went stock-still, looking wildly to the door. My husband did not. “Not on your life,” he whispered, redoubling his efforts. I bit my lips and held on.

For minutes, we could hear the intruders bustling about in the next room, speaking of starch and temperatures and someone named Doreen—who was apparently a fast woman and had done something scandalous with someone named Gianmarco—oblivious to the astoundingly heated tryst happening scarcely five feet away on the other side of the wall.

At one point, Jamie groaned loudly and I clapped a hand over his mouth, hissing, “For gods sake Jamie!” but I bucked back against him, my body completely in agreement with his line of reasoning, the qualms of my higher faculties be damned.

There is, it turns out, something incomparably arousing about having to keep absolutely quiet during the act of love. It somehow makes one feel just that bit wicked, and the maximum effort required to maintain silence heightens every sense, attunes every cell, brings the blood pounding harder and faster than you’ve ever experienced until—

“I shall…” Jamie panted, a full minute after the voices and footsteps had at last subsided, a drop of sweat falling from his forelock to slide down between my breasts. “Have to be…calling you…R—” He wheezed the last, so breathless I couldn’t make it out.

“Calling me… wh—what?” I said, in little better condition myself.

“…Rita…H-ayworth.”

I laughed tiredly. “That good, eh?”

He growled and grinned, scooping both hands under my bare buttocks to pull me even harder onto him. In return, I clenched my muscles in such a way that made his face slacken and his whole body convulse with a groan. The sound resolved at last into a disbelieving laugh. “God Almighty, Sassenach…” He collapsed against my shoulder, rocking slowly against me. “You’ll ride me into an early grave.”

“Well, you know,” I said, putting my arms around his neck and working to steady my breathing, “more or less from day one, I said I’d let you ride me anywhere.”

He snorted with laughter, and lifted his head to show a loving smirk. “Ye certainly did not! God’s my witness, I’d have marrit ye ON day one, if ye had said that in my hearing!”
“Well, perhaps I didn’t say so aloud, but I distinctly remember thinking it.”

“Oh, aye?” he said, amusement fading into tenderness. “And when was that, then?”

“When you held me that first night at Leoch. Do you remember? I was crying about….about Frank, and you pulled me onto your lap and comforted me.”

“Aye.” He leaned his forehead against mine, smiling. “I’m no’ likely to forget that.”

“I recall thinking that it must have been the way you soothed your mares: all gentle tones..soft touches…the sense of care and trust…And I found that I trusted you back.”

He gave a soft, smiling mmm, took my face in both hands, and kissed me, very gently.

Then he straightened, pulled back, and smacked me smartly on the rump. “Well, my Sassenach, it’s a good thing ye kept your thoughts to yourself, else we’d have maybe had our wee foal a few years sooner.”

Thought of the wee foal herself brought us back to reality, and with a kiss and a weary groan, he extricated himself from between my legs.

We quickly made ourselves decent. Thankfully, there were plenty of clean towels to hand…or, rather, they had been clean twenty minutes ago.

Jamie raised his eyebrows at me as he retied the laces of his trunks, “So, ye had it bad for me from day one, aye, Sassenach?”

I said nothing as I shimmied back into my bikini…but I returned the smile, very sheepishly.

He opened the door, eyes twinkling. “So did I.”
He couldn’t help it. Jamie was laughing so hard his ribs creaked and ached like a barrel of ale about to burst its hoops.

Claire was falling against him and trying valiantly to get hold of her breath long enough to speak.....and failed miserably, only coughing and spitting syllables between gasps of laughter, which occasioned a fresh wave of hilarity from them both.

They clung together like children in the middle of the dancing floor, hooting, cackling, and being such hopeless loons that neighboring dancers were beginning to laugh, too...at them.

“Alr—ALRIGHT!” Claire took his face resolutely between her hands, expression stern but she was still gigglng. “We WILL get you doing a proper swing step before the night is out, by Jove, or—!”

“The last twenty minutes would suggest otherwise, mo nighean donn,” he said, still laughing, his cheeks beginning to ache from it. “For the sake of old Jove himself, let’s just sit down for a bit, aye?”

He’d been trying very hard to master the mind-bogglingly irregular wee dance she had been teaching him, but no matter how long they worked at it, he just couldn’t maintain it. He only ended up stepping back when he oughtn’t or smashing into her or another dancer or twirling her the wrong direction so he garroted her in the crook of his arm (as had just occurred), and all in all making such a complete fool of himself that there wasn’t even any room for embarrassment... only happy, foolish, ridiculous, wonderful laughter.

“No-no-no!” Claire grabbed him by the shoulders, laughing and wheedling, “Just one more go, Jamie? Please? I’m sure I can get you to—”

He stopped her smartly with a smiling kiss. “You’re a grand instructor, Sassenach, but your student is a dimwitted numpty and could greatly use a tot of whiskey.”

It was their final night on Cape Cod and they had decided to mark the occasion by taking dinner—just the two of them—in the hotel ballroom. It was a lavish feast, and afterward, the musical ensemble had started up with an uproarious style that had brought the merrymakers onto the floor in droves. Though apparently incapable of mastering the Swing himself, he did enjoy the look of the new dance—all quick turnings and smiling faces and twirling of colorful couples. It was exuberant, full of boundless life and joy, which was precisely how Jamie felt tonight.

The week of the Honeymoon had gone by in the wink of an eye, it seemed, happy, golden days of reading in the sun, playing with Brianna, going around to the wee shops to see all the frivolous things one might buy, and the occasional (somewhat shy, for his part) game of Bocce or Badminton with other couples with whom they became acquainted on the beach. He’d bought Sunglasses, which, to his own eye, made him look like an insect, but Claire said made him look Sexy. He’d had ice cream, too: not his first time tasting the stuff, for he’d had it in France, but God the modern incarnation was decadence itself and made him feel as if he’d be ill with gout within the week. He’d flatly refused any mention of sailing or other sea-going excursions, though. Part of the quintessential Cape experience, it might be, but much as he’d certainly like to see a whale, he wouldn’t go to his death over one.

And through it all, above all, there was Claire: holding her, watching her, laughing with her, and making love to her every chance he was able. Jamie knew that there would perhaps be harder times ahead, that there might come sadness and trouble...but never in his life had he been so unerringly
“Here’s to us, darling!” Claire said, raising her glass as they resumed seats at their dining table. “To our impending return to dreary reality!”

Jamie shook his head, smiling. “Never dreary, mo chridhe.”

She sighed with good humor. “Here’s to a gloriously predictable life, then.”

He raised his glass. “Predictable, I will take, and gladly. Slainte, my love.”

Scarcely had their glasses ceased ringing, than a black-haired young man of about eighteen appeared at Claire’s elbow. “Exc-cuse me, ma’am,” he said, with an attempt at confidence, but clearly sweating in his shoes, “w-would you care to dance?”

“Oh!” she said genuinely taken aback. She cast a quick look over at Jamie. She was blushing.

Jamie was, too, burning, in fact, thinking (as she surely was, too) of the encounter yesterday at the ice cream shop.

In addition to ice cream (for which purpose they’d come), the shop had sold towels, bathing costumes, colorful playthings meant to be used on the beach, and all other sorts of revelers’ oddments, useful or otherwise. Claire had left him to peruse the small selection of books, promising to bring him back a flavor she thought he’d like. Scarcely a minute had passed before the blonde lassie in the red bathing suit had cropped up next to him, ostensibly searching for a book herself, but looking him over like a choice cut of meat. She had asked his name, commented admiringly on his size and build, and stood altogether closer than he thought was proper...and inching closer every moment.

Jamie was more comfortable in 1950 with every passing day, but he still tended to be overly-cautious and tongue-tied in interactions with strangers, not yet having the confidence of knowing the proper protocols for all the various scenarios he might encounter. “Kindly banter with married couples of a common age with him and Claire,” he had more or less mastered; as he had “transactions with shop clerks and other folk in the course of their professions.” “Voluptuous, single-minded young women, barely clad, looking as though they plan to take you where you stand, public setting and wedding ring be damned,” however, had been entirely new, and left him feeling as green, strangled, and helpless as a wean of thirteen.

His instincts had screamed at him to use any means necessary to halt her, but he knew that twentieth-century custom would not permit him to bark harshly at the lass, or to physically push her away from him. Damned if he hadn’t considered both courses of action, though, and with increasing urgency as his polite hints fell on deaf ears. In fact, his aloofness seemed only to amuse her, making her grow more bold, until at the last, she had pressed herself full against him and whispered something obscene in his ear.

He wasn’t sure if it had been providence or the worst of all poor timing that had brought Mrs Byrd, Brianna, and Claire around the corner just at that moment to witness the lass’s final, brazen advance, but he had seized upon it. He had all but lunged to take Bree in his arms and pointedly introduce HIS WIFE to the shameless lass.

He and Claire had laughed about it since—“Good GRIEF, she was on the bloody PROWL for you, Jamie!”—but he still felt shame in thinking back on it, shame that he hadn’t categorically shut down the lassie’s advances, no matter how offensive it might’ve come across....and even more shame at memory of Claire’s face when she’d seen the half-formed cockstand that had risen unbidden under
His lingering guilt over it was what prompted him to swallow the instinctual swell of jealous rage toward the black-haired youth and smile, saying with a geniality he did not feel, “Go on, then, Claire. You deserve a good dancing partner for at least part of the evening.”

But Claire only shook her head, beaming charmingly up at the boy. “You’re very kind, sir, but I shall have to decline. There’s a group of young ladies over that way who look as though they’d like a dance, though!”

“Ye didna have to do that for my sake, Sassenach,” Jamie said, as they watched the crestfallen lad make his way over to the likely lasses.

“I know,” Claire chirped with a smile, “I just don’t want to dance with anyone else, tonight.”

He met her eye and returned the smile, knowing she could see the gratefulness in his look.

They drank and laughed and drank some more and ate peach Cobbler late into the night.

At one point, Jamie noticed that the young dancers were leaving the floor *en masse*, looking put out, a handful of elderly couples moving out to take their place. The frenzied pounding of the Swing music had dissolved into a slow waltz. Though Jamie could say nothing of the tune, he could tell it was a beautiful, grand, sweeping kind of piece—at last, the kind of music he knew.

He stood up abruptly and held out his hand to Claire, bowing low. “May I have the honor, my lady?”

He could see her about to protest but then she softened and took his hand, letting him lead her back out onto the dancing floor.

Excepting the brief attempt at Swing that evening, he hadn’t danced since Hollyrood and not with Claire since Versailles. He’d never had any great liking for the activity in and of itself, and no extraordinary proficiency for it; but he loved the feeling of moving with Claire. It was almost like making love: the both of them so attuned that neither led or was led by the other, just soaring and swirling, moving instinctually with one another in perfect, beautiful synchronicity.

They both were startled when the song ended and the hall erupted in applause, a congratulation Jamie thought intended for the orchestra...but all eyes were on them.

“You should add *dancing master* to your list of prospective careers!” Claire said, a little breathless, as they gave shy nods of thanks to their audience.

He snorted. “Tell that to my actual dancing masters over the years, and they’d double over laughing.”

They settled into a more sedate rhythm for the next song: a slow dance, she called it, which amounted to little more than swaying together and holding one another close. Little art, but undoubtedly intimate.

“Well, *be that as it may,*” she said, “you’re a wonderful dancer, and I like being seen on your arm.”

“You’re verra kind, my love.”

“It certainly doesn’t hurt that you’re the most handsome man in the room, by far.”
He couldn’t help but blush. “Ye dinna wish I were an ugly troll so ye might more easily keep me for yourself? For I canna deny sometimes I wish you werenae nearly so breathtaking, Sassenach.”

“Poppycock,” she said, though she was smiling. She moved her hand from his shoulder up to his neck, raising gooseflesh across his body. “As long as my husband maintains the good sense to keep them at bay, hungry girls can look at him all they like.”

“Oh, aye?” he said, throat dry.

“Aye.” She kissed him, eyes full of mischief, “Because I’m the only one who knows what he sounds like... and tastes like... and feels like... when he’s in my bed.”

She pressed herself full against him and whispered something obscene.

Thankfully, this time, the protocol came as naturally to him as breathing, and he had every intention of following etiquette to the letter.

Forthwith.
I jolted awake and looked wildly for the alarm clock, heart racing. 12:43 AM. I’d agreed to do morning shifts for my first week back at the hospital, but even so, I didn’t need to be up for hours, yet. So, why…?

Jamie. The absence of him next to me on the pillow.

Several nights on the Cape, I had awoken to find him in the throes of some terror, or gone from the bed and clinging to the window frame, letting the cold air brace him. He’d barely spoken, in those times, either stayed away from me entirely, or letting me soothe him back into sleep. It was like Paris all over again, and thought of that made my heart seize. We hadn’t yet spoken of Culloden…but I knew that there were terrors from that day, and horrors that followed, from which Jamie was far from free.

A quick search of the house, though, revealed him sitting comfortably on the living room sofa. I instantly breathed a sigh of relief: he looked a bit pale and was staring off into space, but looked serene and peaceful…unmistakably happy…and in a very familiar way.

He raised a can of beer to me in salute. “Care to join me?”

I crossed to him eagerly. “In sitting, yes. I’ll pass on the drink, since I’ve got to be up for work in a few hours.”

“Suit yourself.” He shifted his legs to make room for me. Perhaps hoping to prevent future “bum Da” incidents, he was wearing the nightshirt I’d bought for him. In terms of construction and coverage, it wasn’t much different from the long shirts in which he’d habitually slept in the eighteenth century, but I had to suppress a giggle at sight of it. Just give him a sleeping cap and a scowl and he’d make the world’s most seductive Ebenezer Scrooge.

Suppressing the urge to reflect further on the absurd scenarios such a thought conjured, I kissed his cheek and said, “Trouble sleeping, love?”

“Indeed, though I dinna ken how, for I’m bone-weary. Achy and pealy-wally from the drive home, I suppose. Hoped a draught might help settle me.”

“Home,” I murmured as I snuggled against him, feeling a thrill run through me at the word. “I like the sound of that.”

“As do I, my Sassenach.”

His voice was warm, still sweet with his smile, though I didn’t think the prospect of living under the same roof was what he’d been thinking of when I’d walked in. “Were you thinking about Bree, just then, by any chance?”

He gave a small ha! of impressed surprise. “Either you’ve picked up a knack for divining thoughts, ma dame blanche, or I’ve lost mine for inscrutability!”

“The latter, I think,” I said feeling the happy glow of him spreading to my own body. “At least where Bree is concerned, anyway. You get this look about you when you think about her…or hold her…or look at her.”

That very look spread once again across his features: the sweetest smile of contented joy.
“Couldna help it even if I tried,” he said, squeezing my hand. “Though I never would. Just the fact
that she exists—yours, and mine, a new person God created from our love…” He shook his head in
wonderment. “It’s the simplest fact there is, that bairns typically result from coupling, but the miracle
and gift of it hits me deep…and I still sometimes canna believe I have you both to care for…to love.”
He set down his drink and pulled me closer with both arms, kissing my forehead. “I’m a verra
blessed man, indeed.”

“We’re blessed. All of us.” I kissed him softly on the neck. “That’s what you were thinking about,
then?”

“Aye. That and…well, specifically, I was thinking of what Brianna must have been like when she
was first born. I’ll wager she was a bonnie one, aye?”

“She was, indeed,” I said. “Bonnie and loud and perfect.”

“Tell me about her?” he asked quietly.

“Of course,” I said, rubbing his arm. “Would you like to see, as well?”

“See?” His eyebrows drew together for a moment, then raised in excitement, comprehension
dawning. “You have PhotoGraphs?”

In answer, I leaned forward and plucked up the photo album from its niche under the coffee table.
Jamie sat on the edge of the sofa, his greed apparent. I perched beside him and opened the book to
lay across both our laps.

The first page held four pictures, all taken unbeknownst to me by a kindly, perceptive nurse. The
winter sun was streaming through a window onto my face. I was in a white hospital gown, my hair
unbelievably messy in a cloud around my head, but I was oblivious, beaming down at a swaddled
bundle in my arms: my daughter, who I was holding for the first time.

I’d gotten to see her immediately after the cesarean, I explained to Jamie, but only for the barest
moment, with scarcely enough time to kiss her forehead before she was whisked off to the intensive
care unit. Her lungs were not functioning as they should. Her skin held a blue tinge, made even more
alarming in appearance by the pasty vernix that still coated her face. With tufts of copper hair and her
ears…those precious, wing-like ears, she was so like Faith, so small…and so still…I began
screaming as soon as they took her away. They had to put me under full anesthesia to close the
incision.

I awoke from medicated nightmares, alone in a bleak hospital room…with no child to be seen. I’d
not screamed further, too weak for the task, but I had shaken and sobbed until my bones were sapped
of all energy, my soul of any desire to move or speak. The doctors were kind and soothing, telling
me that everything would be fine, but giving me no concrete, medical news of Brianna to reassure
me. I hadn’t had anyone there with me at the hospital. Father Gentry had come by a day or two later,
and would have come sooner if asked, but on the first night of Brianna’s life, I had been completely
and truly alone in the world. In that darkness, I’d mourned for Brianna. For Faith. For Jamie. And I’d
made contingency plans for how to end my life.

But then, I’d woken to a gentle shaking and a warm, red, squirming bundle being placed in my arms.
I couldn’t have said how long I held her. Laughing. Weeping. Kissing her. Nourishing her with my
body. Making promises to her. Talking to her about Jamie. Talking to Jamie about her.

The real, breathing Jamie pulled me closer to him. “You were all alone, mo ghraidh.” He leaned his
head against mine, voice thick with weeping. “It… truly breaks my heart….that I wasna there for ye either time. I’m so verra sorry for–” His voice broke.

“You couldn’t help it either time,” I said, though my voice was tight with pain. I reached a hand up to draw him in for a kiss.

The notion that had been growing in my heart this last week stirred once more. Was this the wrong time to voice it? Or…

“If someday there should…be a third time…”

The transformations that came over his face were breathtaking, a coup of utter joy, immediately followed by terror. “But you said yourself that both of ye could have died. Surely you canna put yourself at risk again.” When I didn’t immediately respond, he shook his head, hard. “No. I willna lose you, Claire.”

It would be dangerous to conceive again, the doctors had said. At the time, I’d assured them the point was entirely moot. Now… “You won’t lose me, Jamie,” I said, with far more certainty than I felt. “I want another child with you. Not at once, perhaps, but…”

I trailed off, unable to express how strongly I felt this need— to bear a child of ours in happiness and peace. I could live without it, in the same way that I could live without… without ever going to medical school… but in just the same way, I wanted it. And it mattered.

Jamie could see something of this in my face. He was quiet for a moment, then took my hand and squeezed. “When the next bairn comes, then,” he said, and though there was still a quiver of fear in the sound, he was smiling, “whenever it comes, I’ll no’ leave your side. Not for a moment.”

I knew any hospital would do their best to dissuade him, to keep the father away from the operating room or delivery suite. I’d bloody like to see them try.

He bent his head and kissed me, very gently, cradling my head in his hands. He broke the kiss with a small laugh, beaming. “Another bairn… when my heart is already full to bursting… Jesus, will this embarrassment of riches never stop?”

“No,” I said, beaming back. “At least, I certainly hope not.”

Jamie turned the page of the album. “Oh, just look at her, then,” he said, lightly touching the paper that showed Bree, two or three weeks old, yawning hugely on my lap. “So tiny… and such a bonny, sweet face.”

Every photo, captioned only with a date, captured a moment in Brianna’s life.

(December, 1948). At six weeks, on her christening day, gawping skeptically up at Father Gentry.

(February, 1949). At three months, sleeping peacefully in her crib, curled up against her stuffed rabbit.

(September, 1949). At ten months, taking wobbly steps toward the camera.

(November 23, 1949). Covered with the icing of her first birthday cake.

(March, 1950). On my lap, the both of us careening down a hill on a sled toward Mrs. Byrd.

(June, 1950). Snuggled against my shoulder, half-asleep, one fist grasping my hair as I stroked hers.
Without warning, Jamie stood up and walked out of the room. I didn’t have to ask what he was doing.

Less than a minute later, he returned, holding a pajamaed Bree against his shoulder. She was still waking up, and was grumbling vague, fretful interrogatories, her curls a frenzied pouf around her face.

“Whisht,” Jamie shushed softly against her hair. “Go back to sleep, lass. Whisht, now.”

“Hab-beffist?” she asked croakily, rubbing her eyes.

“Nay, it’s no’ yet time to have breakfast, a chuisle,” Jamie said, his own voice rather hoarse as he sat, Bree on his belly, facing him. He tightened his arms under her, smiling, but blinking hard. “Da just… needed to hold his wee bairn, s’all.”

“Beebair?” she said, straightening and looking intently back at him.

“Aye, that’s right,” he said, as he kissed her tenderly and lightly cupped her face, “you, sweet one, are my own wee bairn.”

A look of glee suddenly stole over her sleepy features. She screwed up her brows fiercely, waved both hands, and growled out a tiny, “rrrrroahhhh!”

“Oh—OH MY—” I laughed, “there’s a scary, ‘wee BEAR’ in here, Jamie!”

Jamie shook with laughter too, but played along, rearing back in mock fear, “Stay ye BACK, foul beastie!”

Bree, triumphant, gave another roar which turned seamlessly into a mighty yawn, her would-be paws coming up to rub her eyes again.

Jamie stilled and brought his arms around her, voice low and soft with love. “Come lay your head, now, sleepy cub.” He turned to lay on his back. She resisted for a moment, trying to push up with her hands, but Jamie’s soft Gaelic and gentle touch brought her at last to settle against his chest. Jamie held out a hand to me, and while the sofa was scarcely wide enough, I curled against him, holding them both.

When I woke a few hours later, the dawn light as good as any alarm clock, I had a screaming spasm in my neck and my back was sore. But Jamie and Bree were still sleeping peacefully, she tucked protectively between him and the back cushions, her round cheek smushed against his shoulder. Jamie felt unusually warm to the touch, but I still pulled the afghan from the back of the sofa and tucked it around them. Turning to head for the shower, I paused at sight of the album on the coffee table.

I went to the hallway where my beach bag still sat, and rifled in it until I drew out the camera. The shutter made a satisfying flackk as I captured the scene.

(July, 1950).
My first day back at the hospital had been a whirlwind, and no two ways about it. I’d phoned the hospital on that first morning together, of course, and had had to explain the basic contours of the situation to account for my unexpected absence. On top of that, I’d personally called my two closest work friends to tell them of the miracle that had transpired. Whether it was their doing or that of the administration, I didn’t know (though I suspected my young friend Della was the culprit), but whatever the means, news had traveled quickly through the ranks of the hospital employees. I’d hardly made it through the door before I’d found myself at the center of a never-ending throng of coworkers (some of whom I’d have sworn I’d never laid eyes on before) demanding when they would get to see “HIM!” and wanting to hear “absolutely everything, Claire!”

While I was gratified by all the kind attentions and well-wishes I received over the course of the day every time I entered a new room, it did get rather tiring, explaining over and over exactly how (or apparently how) my dead husband had dropped out of the sky and back into my life. Between this and a barrage of the most challenging patients the fates could muster for the occasion of my return, I was exhausted and beyond relieved to be making my way home from the bus stop, the evening shadows just starting to fall.

Even so, I felt slightly apprehensive as I made my way up the walk. Jamie had asked to be allowed to mind Brianna on his own this week. It was obvious that he was dying for the chance to try his hand at daddy-duty, at least for a time while he was still getting to know her. So, we’d decided to give Mrs. Byrd a much-needed break and I’d left the house that morning mentally crossing my fingers for luck. I knew there was likely no real reason to worry. Jamie was no stranger to small children—from what I’d seen, in fact, he was a natural!…but I did wonder how he had done on his first day operating unassisted.

I pushed open the door with a cheery “Hello, my loves!” on my lips….and froze, my slight apprehension dropping immediately into pure terror. There were no lights on. The air smelled alarmingly foul and sour. And Brianna was crying—screaming.

I threw down my purse and ran for the nursery. “Jamie?!?” No answer came.

I found Bree standing up in her crib, clutching the railings, face red and shining with tears and snot. “Oh Bree, baby!” I choked, snatching her her up. Oh sweetie, are you hurt?"

She wasn’t; not visibly, anyway, nor seemingly in pain. I brushed her hair out of her eyes and tried to get her to look at me. “Where’s Da, baby? Where’s Da??” She sobbed out something I couldn’t understand.

I set her back hastily in the crib, eliciting a fresh wave of angry squalling which I tried to tune out as I ran toward the bedroom. “JAMIE??” He wasn’t there, nor in the kitchen, the back yard, or the living room. My mind raced in panic, trying to fathom what could possibly have happened. He wouldn’t have just left her, not in a million years, for any reason. Had someone…taken him? Hurt him?

As I stood shaking in the front hallway, feeling my throat constrict in panic with the sound of Bree’s screams filling my consciousness, trying to determine what to do, I somehow managed to hear the small, pitiful sound, cracking with strain.

“Sassenach?”

I ran toward the sound and hurled open the bathroom door to find Jamie on the ground, slumped
“Jesus!!” I flung myself to my knees on the ground beside him. “Jamie, love, are you alright?!”

It was a stupid question. He very obviously was not alright. His face was ashen and he was shaking from head to toe. The hair around his face was matted with sweat, his arms were curled up tight against his chest, and his speech was stilted from the uncontrollable chattering of his teeth. “Tried t-to call —back t’ye — couldn’t —”

“It’s alright, it’s alright — You’re here, that’s all that — Oh, love,” I breathed, struck by the utter misery written on his features and in his body.

“Bn’puking most-th’ day,” he croaked, closing his eyes as I laid my cool, shaking hand on his forehead. “Think I’ve’a—fever, but I—feel s—co—cold. M’ throat’s’on fire…”

He did have a fever, a very high one, and I should have bloody seen it coming on last night. He’d looked pale and said he felt aches in his body; there was the hoarseness in his voice that I’d attributed purely to emotion; and most of all the startling heat of him when I’d left him asleep on the couch with Bree. I fumbled for and found his swollen lymph nodes and heard the rattle in his chest as he doubled over with a wracking cough. Yes, flu, more than likely. There was a terrible bout of it going around Boston, uncharacteristic for the time of year, but wreaking havoc, particularly among the elderly and—

“You haven’t been handling Brianna, have you?” I demanded sharply, hearing the screams in the next room escalate to a pitch I had never heard from her.

Jamie’s red, bleary eyes were suddenly wide with guilt. “Well—aye—I have. Ke—” he broke off, coughing violently, “—kept her in her crib when I needed t’vomit—but had to be s-sure she was—changed and f-fed and—”

“For God’s SAKE, Jamie, you have influenza!” I snapped, more harshly than I’d intended. “That’s grippe—catarrh!” I heard his sharp intake of breath as I as I turned to rummage in the cabinet beneath the sink for a washcloth. My hands were shaking as I stood to wet it at the sink, terror unhinging me in a way to which I wasn’t accustomed. I had to grit my teeth very hard to keep from crying. “Why in God’s name did you not call Penelope? Did you not think of Bree? Small children die every year from influ—”

A strangled sob tore from his throat.

I turned to see a broken man, face in his shaking hands as if to swallow himself from my view. “M’sorry.”

“Oh, Jamie,” I breathed, though I was all but breathless. I knelt beside him and tried to lift his head. He wouldn’t look at me, even when I pried his hands free.

His face was grotesque with despair as he choked it out: “—killed—her—took—?”

Faith.

“Oh, God, forgive me….” I whispered, speaking both to God and to Jamie. “No, no, sweetheart, I should never had suggested—” I suppressed a sob myself and pulled him against my chest, murmuring urgently into his hair, “NO. Bree will be fine, Jamie…she’ll be just fine…”

He heard me, but he didn’t have any words, just shook in my arms, the joint onslaughts of body and conscience simply too much for speech.
My own throat was thick as I clutched him tight, trying to pass reassurance from my body into his through my touch, through my words. “Bree is safe…She’s safe…You’re going to be alright, too, we just—just need to get you to the hospital…right away.”

I had not seen him this badly off since l’abbaye de Sainte Anne, and my moment of carelessly-expressed fear for Brianna was now nothing compared to the very real possibility of losing Jamie to twentieth-century germs. Young as she was, Bree’s immune system was far better equipped to fight influenza than Jamie’s, bolstered by two hundred years of immunity inherited from me. Jamie’s would be like a leaf in a hailstorm of illnesses that had spent centuries mutating and strengthening.

I silently cursed myself for short-sightedness. In our week-and-a-half of rapturous happiness, I had completely neglected more practical considerations such as getting him vaccinated. And if I lost him because of it—

As I rose, staggering in my haste to go for the telephone, a clammy hand grabbed my leg. His eyes were blurred, his whole being seemingly on the point of fracture between fear, hope, grief, guilt, and pain. “You’re sure? The lass?”

I looked him straight in the eye, and while the same emotions were pressing down on me, I was relieved to hear that my voice was steady and strong. “I promise you, Jamie. We will not lose Bree.”

God…deliver me from this….Keep my daughter safe.

A NIGHTMARE. ONE, LONG ENDLESS NIGHTMARE PUNCTUATED BY PAIN. PAINS IN HIS BODY. ALL OVER HIS BODY.

FEVER.

EVERYTHING BLINDED HIM WITH WHITE LIGHT—GROUND, WALLS, EVERYTHING SHINING AGONIZINGLY SILVER, BURNING HIS EYES.

EVIL SOUNDS LIKE DEMONS MAGNIFIED OVERHEAD AND FROM THE OMNIPRESENT MACHINES.

FEVER.

PEOPLE. SO MANY PEOPLE. HURRYING. BARKING. FORCING THINGS DOWN HIS THROAT. STABBING HIM WITH NEEDLES. TETHERING HIM TO MACHINES THAT SUCKED BLOOD FROM HIM BEFORE HIS EYES AND PUSHED FOREIGN SUBSTANCES IN. HIS BODY WAS NO LONGER HIS OWN. HE PRAYED THAT THE GROUND WOULD OPEN AND TAKE HIM AWAY FROM THIS HELLISH CIRCLE.

But Claire was there, always.


Keep us safe, mo nighean donn.

“Claire…seriously?”
It was a young woman’s whispering voice that had awakened him.

“‘Seriously,’ what?” Claire whispered back.

Jamie tilted his head surreptitiously, though still feigning sleep.

“You honest-to-goodness came across this guy by natural means? You didn’t brainwash him? Hire him from central casting?”

“Honest to goodness,” came Claire’s response, and he could hear the grin in it. “Simple holy matrimony.”

…and miraculous journeys through the very fabric of time, forbye.

“Holy MOLEY,” the rapturous whisperer intoned in her nasal American accent, “I’m moving to Scotland tomorrow. He is GORRRRRGEOUS!”

Jamie ducked his chin beneath the blanket to cover his grin, though he chanced a peek through slitted lids. Claire was standing in the doorway of the hospital room with the two women, fellow nurses by their uniforms, though Claire herself was in plain clothes.

“Listen,” said the lass seriously, a tiny wee things of about nineteen with dark blonde hair and huge eyes, “if you ever get tired of him, say, or—”

“Oh, Della, hush, you are being ridiculous,” said the older woman with the spectacles. “Claire, honey, he could be ugly as sin and still we’d be over the moon for you.”

“Oh, Claire, surely you don’t take offense?” said younger woman’s, eyes wide with fretful alarm.

“Of course not, Della,” Claire whispered, laughing. “And thank you, Marian.”

“Because, truly, I’m so very happy for you, too!” Della sighed rapturously. “To have your man—Brianna’s daddy!—back from the dead…it’s a miracle!!” The lass gave an enthusiastic mmmm! and embraced Claire. “He’s definitely not ugly as sin, though,” she said emphatically as they broke apart, shaking her head emphatically. “DE-FI-NIT-LEE NOT.”

Jamie could hear the unmistakable fondness beneath Claire’s wry, “Very glad you approve, sweetheart.”

He grinned and slipped back in and out of a medicated doze, catching snippets of their conversation about the honeymoon, about future plans and hospital business. Above all, he listened for Claire’s voice and let it soothe him, as warm and comforting as hearthfire.

The next time he came fully awake, she was sitting on the edge of the bed beside him. Seeing that he was conscious, she ran a hand down the side of his face. “How are you feeling, my love?”

“Brianna?” he asked at once, pushing himself into a sitting position. “She’s well?”

She smiled. “Not even a sniffle, Penelope says. Same as yesterday. And the day before.” She kissed him.

He breathed in deep relief and murmured a prayer of thanks.

“But you, Jamie?” she pressed, feeling his forehead with the back of a cool hand. “Are you feeling better today?”
“Aye, much better, though a bit woozy and wobbly in my wame. Not like the vomiting from the
days before, just…odd.”

“That’ll be all the vaccinations, I expect,” she said, peering up at the machines at the bedside. “They
make you feel a bit terrible even when you’ve had just one… and you’ve had to make up for twenty-
seven years’ worth.”

Claire had done a remarkable job explaining away his lack of documented medical history.

“Oh, lost records, a fire I think? Terribly unfortunate, but c’est la vie! Would you be
able to help us get him up to date with some new ones?”

“I believe he had that injection as a child, but let’s order it, too, just in case. Better safe
than sorry!”

Folk minded Claire, Jamie had observed through the fever and endless pokings with the wee jabbers;
grudgingly from time to time, and with no little rolling of eyes, but they tended to give ’Nurse Bea—
sorry—Fraser’ her way. Consequently, James Fraser (born January 17, 1923, thanks to Frank
Randall) was now properly documented and accounted for, as far as the doctors were concerned, at
least.

His many scars, of course, had aroused considerable comment of their own from those that dressed
him, bathed him, and examined him. “Prisoner in the war,” however, appeared to serve as an
acceptable explanation for nearly all remarks. Many Americans had fought in Claire’s war, she said;
beyond that, many of the women who worked at the hospital had husbands or kin recently deployed
to the new war in the far east. Consequently, most had knowledge of the horrors of war and simply
murmured, “Thank you for your service.” The sidelong looks did not entirely vanish, though.

“The good news is,” Claire said brightly, at last completing her review of the chirping machines, “the
virus itself is gone. You’ll be able to go home soon since your fever has passed and you’re no longer
contagious. Just need to get you past the dehydration and you’ll be good as new.”

“That’s good to hear. I should like to feel new. At present, I feel as used and worn down as a crone’s
bones.”

She kissed him again and then suddenly straightened. “Oh! Speaking of bones, I brought something
to show you!” She reached behind her and placed a large, black sheet of—paper? No, Plastic?—
onto his lap.

He stared down, baffled. “You’ve brought me…Photographs of a skeleton?

“My bones?” He looked down in horror. “How did they get the Camera in —? They—cut me
—??”

“No, nothing like that. It’s a special kind of camera that can capture the impression of shadows and
shapes underneath the skin. See? Here’s one of your right arm and hand. You can see all the breaks
and fusions of the bones from when—well….”

Sure enough, he could see the white ghosts of his hand, traced with breakage lines. From the look on
her face, Claire was regretting very much reminding him of how those breaks had been made… of
Jack Randall. The thought of the bastard had indeed darkened his mind momentarily, but his
thoughts at present were only of stunned awe and gratitude. Apart from the fourth finger, it was
essentially the same as the image of his other hand. It was there, in black and white, as if he needed
further proof: Claire, by her skill and sheer force of will, had kept him whole. Good Lord, what a remarkable person.

He couldn’t help but stare at her as she spoke hurriedly on to move past the implied topic of Wentworth. “It’s commonplace now, but it really is a remarkable technology. I had them do all sorts of tests and scans while you’ve been ill to be sure all is well with you, otherwise.”

Jamie had to blink once or twice before he could tear his eyes away from her face. “And? Did I pass the tests?”

“Top marks,” she said fondly. “Too many healed fractures to count but other than desperately needing the full barrage of known vaccinations, nothing to raise immediate alarm. You’ll have to have a few more in a few months, it isn’t good to have them all at once.”

“I must be perfectly frank wi’ ye, Sassenach: even had ye told me they’d found something dire requiring a longer stay in hospital, I’d have put ye over my shoulder directly and walked us home.”

“Oh would you indeed?” She laughed. “Barefooted with your arse hanging out of your gown?”

“Dinna think that’d stop me! I’m coming out of my skin in this place,” he sighed irritably. “It’s only you that makes it bearable, mo chridhe. Will ye… will ye maybe lie down wi’ me a bit?” At Claire’s raised eyebrows, he added, “Dinna fash, I havena the strength for that. I only wish to hold ye in my arms for a bit… if you’re willing.”

She was willing, and she laid down at once, curling on her side so that her back was against him. He carefully wrapped his arms about her (not wishing to dislodge the tubes that still connected him to the machines) and exhaled deeply as he rested his head on hers, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair.

“What was it you sang to me, Sassenach?” he asked, a long time later.

“Mmmm? When, darling?” she said, sounding as though she’d nearly been asleep.

“I dinna ken exactly…I just recall you hearing ye singing over me when I was in the worst of the fever. I thought maybe I’d dreamed it…I dinna think I’ve ever heard you sing before. You’ve a verra lovely voice.”

She laughed weakly. “And how would you know that? You can’t tell one note from another!”

He stroked her hip. “That’s so, but I can judge the quality of a voice, ken, and you’ve a strong, clear sound. Verra sweet.” He paused and bent to kiss her behind the ear. “Thank you for seeing me safe and recovered, mo ghraidh.”

She reached back a hand to gently squeeze his thigh. “Thankfully, I don’t think your life was ever in serious danger. I did fear for you terribly, but we were lucky. Besides, I didn’t do much, medically speaking.”

“But I was afraid and you stayed wi’ me,” he said, stroking her arm, “helped me fight it. You were always there, and so strong and sure, that I was able to be at peace. That’s no small thing. Thank you.”

She craned back her head so that their foreheads touched. “It’s what we do for one another,” she said softly. “Protect and care.” They sat peacefully for a time, breathing together. Jamie savored the cool, solid weight of her in his arms.

Then he coughed and squeezed her significantly. “If we’re discussing marital reciprocity… I can
remember a number of times I brought ye food when you were hungry…”

She laughed in earnest at that. “Is the hospital fare as terrible as they say?”

He gave a dramatic shudder. “Wouldna feed it to my lowliest sow.”

She pushed herself up to a sitting position. “Let me see I can bring you something better. There’s a steakhouse a few blocks away.”

“You are a pearl above price, mo nighean donn.” He kissed her hand in a courtly fashion. “Medium-rare, if ye please, and tell them not to hold back on the fried potatoes.”
Mama

With the increasing return of Jamie’s good health also came his damnable Fraser stubbornness—*with a vengeance.*

“*Ye need rest in your own bed, Sassenach,*” Jamie had insisted, squeezing my hand and leveling his eyes at me as I sat on the edge of the hospital bed. “*Three nights cramped in the wee chair there canna be sufficient to keep ye strong and ready to work a shift tomorrow.*”

“I’m *FINE,* Jamie,” I had insisted. “I don’t want to leave you alone here, not until you’re fully—”

“—*Ye said yourself that I’m on the mend, Claire, and I am more than capable of seeing myself through a night of sleep. Besides, Miss Della, here, has promised to see to my every need that may arise.*”

If I hadn’t known *Miss Della* as a personal friend, I’d *certainly* have stayed after seeing the way her entire body quivered at *that* statement; but I knew for a fact she was all talk and no action—a flirt, and no cure for it, but by no means a seductress. Thank goodness, too, for I couldn’t deny that the prospect of a good night’s sleep (fully horizontal, to boot!) was more than alluring.

And so, I’d submitted, kissed Jamie, given Della a *half*-joking lecture about the sanctity of marriage, and caught the bus home.

“*Hello?*” I called as I stepped through the door.

“MAMAAAAAAAA!!!”

“*HELLO* there, lovey!” I cried, dropping my purse just in time to intercept the pajamaed orange missile barreling toward me. I swept her up off the floor and squeezed her tight to my chest.

“Ohhhh, *there's* my Bree,” I murmured with a wide smile. She smelled of floral soap and buttered toast and I stood swaying with her, content just to feel her warm, little body in my arms.

Bree was too excited to cuddle for long, though. She lurched back and grinned at me, launching into a dizzying oration about books and cake and (I thought) a rabbit she had seen at the park.

“Sounds like you had a *lovely* time with Grannie Byrd while Mama was away!” I said, meeting eyes with Penelope herself and hoping my look conveyed the depths of my gratitude and affection.

“Aye!” Bree agreed, squirming until I put her down so she could scurry away on some important mission.

After convincing Penelope to go home for some well-deserved rest (proving to be as difficult as I had been to Jamie, in that regard), I brushed Bree’s teeth and mine, changed into my nightgown, and carried Bree to the nursery.

“Hmmm...Still a bit early for bed, yet. Shall we play for a bit, darling?”

As I knelt to set her down on the floor, I found my arms reticent to loosen their hold on her. Brianna squirmed and threw her weight against my arm, grunting and reaching in the direction of the colorful, wooden blocks nearby.

I kissed her temple and released her with a low, “Mama’s *missed* you, baby,” that made my heart ache even with the uttering.
It was much more than just having been gone these last few days. This was the first time in what seemed like an age since I'd been completely alone in the house with Brianna.

As if thinking along the same lines, Bree looked suddenly up from her pile of blocks. “Airss-Da?”

I smiled, always surprised by the rapid advance of her language skills. “Da’s still at the hospital, lovey,” I said. This satisfied her at once. To Bree, “at the hospital” meant simply at work, and thus caused no great alarm.

I laid down on the nursery rug, curling on my side around her so that she was leaning on my hip. I propped up on one elbow, stroked her hair with the other hand, hating the feel of the lump that had taken residence in my throat.

I wasn’t jealous. Lord knew it wasn’t that. Seeing her with Jamie—watching their bond deepening with every passing day—was the greatest miracle I ever hoped to be granted in my life.

...but Bree had been mine, only mine, since the day she was born. No...longer than that: since the day I had decided to leave Frank. The moment that fateful decision had been made, my world had shifted: this new person had belonged to me, and me alone. It would be up to me, I had told myself, to teach her; to see that she was safe and fed; that she was educated; that she was able to achieve anything she wished in life, with nothing to hold her back. As terrifying and lonely as that reality was, I had burned it into my own being, an indelible mantle of responsibility, and it had linked me to Bree in a way that went deeper than mere biological relation. Brianna’s life and existence was completely dependent on me....and how could such a connection not be deeply linked to the feelings of love and the sense of closeness between two people? And now that Jamie was here, forever, that responsibility, that bond, that closeness, that love, were necessarily shared.

Damn it, I didn’t begrudge Jamie a moment, not a single one, but....

“You’re still my girl, too, aren’t you?” I said aloud. The longing in my voice rang to the very corners of the room.

Brianna wasn’t yet old enough to process so abstract a question, of course, and thus went happily on about her task of stacking blocks and knocking them over, singing a nonsensical rendition of Clementine.

I smiled and shook my head to clear it as I sat up and scooped her into my lap. She was the perfect size to fit against me, and I wrapped my arms around her little plump middle. I could see the diamond-shaped birthmark behind her ear that she’d had since birth. Had Jamie noticed it?

I wondered.

Jesus, it doesn’t matter, Beachamp. Stop this nonsense.

I rested my cheek on the top of her warm, little head. “I love you—so—so very much, Bree-baby.”

She didn’t even miss a beat, just piped, “Luhvoo-Mama,” and turned her face up for a kiss.

Yes, I thought, as I kissed her lips, her cheeks, her nose, and squeezed her even tighter: there will still be firsts for just the two of us, as well.
Victories

[The next morning]

Jamie was kissing me: my cheeks, my temples, my eyelids, my shoulders, the warm pressure of his lips moving across my body, soft and comforting and home.

That was the first thing I became aware of as I swam upward from the clutches of sleep.

The second was that it was far, FAR too light in the room.

I bolted upright, nearly smacking heads with Jamie. “Wha — what time is it??” I slurred in a rush of panic.

“About half past nine,” came the soft reply, blissfully unconcerned.

“Jesus H bloody effing—!” I threw back the blankets, my muscles feeling maddeningly as though they’d been dipped in cement — two bloody hours late already, god, this would mean the sack if Nurse Gordon was shift manager today—but Jamie took me by both shoulders and pushed me firmly back onto the pillows. “Jamie, what are you — get OFF, you brute! I have to get to—”

“No, ye don’t.”

“But—I was supposed to drop Bree off on the way to — !”

“When ye didna report for work at seven,” he said, stubbornly talking over me, “I spoke wi’ Miss Della. She’s covering your shift today. And I phoned Penelope from the hospital room to tell her.”

He smiled sweetly in that way that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. “All’s taken care of, lass. You’re at your leisure today.”

“Oh! That—that was—very kind of them,” I said slowly, rubbing my eyes and still trying to regain my senses from sleep. A wave of guilt made me groan. “Ugh, I feel terrible for this—Of all the unprofessional—”

“Dinna fash, mo chridhe. You’ll be back on schedule tomorrow,” Jamie said soothingly, rubbing my leg. “I, for one, am glad of it: you evidently needed the extra rest.”

“You’re wearing slacks,” I blurted, staring at his trousers through still-bleary eyes.

“Aye, so I am,” he laughed, bemused. “Naught gets past you, Sassenach. Perhaps you should join the police brigade, with a hawk’s eye like that.”

With a snap, reality fell back into place, and I stared at him in horror. “Please, please, PLEASE tell me you didn’t go AWOL from the hospital, Jamie...”

“A...wall...?”

“Absent without leave?” I said in rising anxiety. “Did you just...walk out??”

He grinned. “No, t’was an honorable discharge for James Fraser. The doctor said when he came ‘round this morning I was fit enough to go home, at long last.”
“Oh, darling, that’s wonderful news. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there with you to—” I broke off and stared at him again, my mouth hanging open. “How the bloody hell did you get home???”

“ Took the Bus.”

“You what?!” Good grief, I was getting dry-mouthed from all this astonishment.

“The OmniBus. Wasn so difficult,” he said with an offhand shrug. “No more so than the train or Aeroplane. Only had to ask about as to which was the closest stop to the house, find it on the wee map, and follow the routes.”

Despite himself, he was looking exceptionally pleased with his success. I leaned back on the pillow, shaking my head in genuine wonder. “Well, look at you: Mr. Cosmopolitan!”

Jamie grinned still wider and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “Aye, and I dinna even vomit once. Surely I deserve a medal of some kind.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said, grinning back.

He leaned in to kiss me, but was halted but the sudden, grumpy, “G’MOOR-NEEEEEN!” bellowed from the nursery.

We laughed, and I began to swing my legs out of bed. Jamie, though, put out a hand. “I’ll fetch her, love.”

I heard his footsteps as he padded into the nursery, followed immediately by an exultant, “DAAAA!!”

“And good morning to you, a leannan.” I heard him groan in mock effort as he lifted her. “There’s my bonnie lass. Did ye miss me?”

They appeared a few moments later in the bedroom doorway just in time for me to see her give him a sloppy kiss on the cheek with an emphatic mmmmwah!

“I’ve missed you too, cub.” He returned the kiss and placed another five or six on her forehead for good measure. “Now, you, Sassenach,” he said briskly, turning his eye on me, “are going to stay abed—AYE, ye most certainly are—while I make us all some breakfast.”

“Oh, erm...Is that so?” I said apprehensively. Jamie had made impressive strides in navigating the novelties of 1950, but household machines still tended to flummox him, on the whole. The morning before the wedding, he had come close to setting the kitchen on fire while trying to use the toaster.

As if following my uneasy line of thought, he laughed good-naturedly. “I’ll no’ say that it mightn’t burn to a crisp on the first attempt, but I’m in a conquering mood, today, my lovely Claire, and the Electric Stove is the opponent.” He looked down at Bree. “Will ye stay and cuddle wi’ your Mama, then, or come help Da wi’ the cooking?”

“Mmahelp!” Bree said decisively.

“A bonnie wee lieutenant reporting for duty?” Jamie asked, inspecting her with an air of stern command. “A braw fighter, by the looks of ye, to be sure.” He cocked an eyebrow. “But can ye be relied upon to follow your captain’s orders come what may?”

“No!” Brianna crowed automatically.

We both coughed with laughter. “NO?”
“AYE!” she amended with equal vigor, giggling and clapping her hands for emphasis.

“That’s what I thought! Right then, soldier,” Jamie said dramatically, shifting her in his right arm and brandishing an imaginary dirk over their heads with his left. “TUALACH ARD!”

“Toodle-car!”

And off they charged, Red Jamie and Red Brianna, to vanquish the morning’s scrambled eggs.
“Sassenach, please” may I take this damned thing off? It’s tickling my nose something fierce… and not being able to see where we’re going doesna make the urge to vomit any less acute.”

His wife—or the voice of his wife to his left—came back with a bright, “No, you may not!”

“Sass—” Jamie felt his stomach lurch and he clamped his mouth shut to focus on breathing through his tickled nose, damned be his wife for it.

“You won’t have to wear it long,” she assured him, reaching over to rub his shoulder. “We’re almost there, I promise. I just don’t want the surprise to be ruined!”

“What if ye go ahead and tell me now,” he wheedled, groaning and gripping the sides of his seat tighter as they thudded across a pothole in the road, “and I’ll promise to be verra enthusiastic indeed in my reaction?”

“You can be as enthusiastic as you want… when we get there!”

Jamie bit back his response and concentrated on commiserating with the singer from the Record Mrs. Byrd had played ad nauseum yesterday:

Sometimes I live in the country
Sometimes I live in town
Sometimes I have a great notion
To jump into the river and drown

It was Friday: nearly a full week had gone by without any of the Frasers being ill, getting hospitalized, missing work, or otherwise being struck by the fates. Jamie, supported when needed by Mrs. Byrd (who came for a part of each day to clean, cook, and tend the house), had minded Brianna for the entirety of the week, and would gladly have done so again today, except that his wife (wearing sand-colored trousers, and a shirt of garish plaid) had woken him that morning saying that she had “a surprise!” for him.

It was her day off from the hospital, and consequently, would normally have been Penelope’s as well, except Claire had arranged otherwise. With plans for Brianna to stay at home with Mrs. Byrd, they had loaded themselves (Jamie wearing the prescribed blue jeans) into that venerable lady’s Van —no, no, CAR: the small ones are Cars—and off they’d jolted down the roads away from the city to God knew where.

For the first twenty minutes, it had been the normal business of fixing his eye on a point straight ahead and endeavoring all his energy on trying not to be sick. Then, she’d tossed him a red handkerchief and blithely told him to blindfold himself. It must be her latent training from the English army, he’d thought wryly, to think it all fine and natural for “a surprise!” to necessitate treating the beneficiary like a damned abductee.

She was right, though, that they hadn’t long to go. Not five minutes later, Jamie felt the Car slowing to a halt.
“No, no, don’t take the blindfold off!” she said sharply as he reached up to do just that. “Sit right there, alright?” There came the sound of Claire’s door opening, then closing with a slam, followed by his own opening. Claire grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the Car to his feet. “Now, put these on—”

“Oh for God’s SAKE, Sass—”

But she was already clamping something soft over each ear. Apparently it was some sort of ear-hat meant to squeeze his brains out through his eye sockets.

“Now take my hand and come with me,” came her muffled voice.

This is the woman God has given ye, Jamie, jailer though she may be.

Blind and now deaf, Jamie obeyed, and allowed her to lead him across a graveled path that crunched under his feet. He tried an experimental sniff for clues, but damn it all, he was still unable to smell much of anything upon the air due to the lingering sniffle from his illness. He sighed and relaxed his shoulders. Whither thou goest, I shall go, mo nighean donn.

“Alright!” she said finally, stopping so suddenly that he ran into her and nearly toppled. She whipped off the ear stoppers, then the blindfold, such that his senses were overwhelmed by the inrush of sound and light.

“THERE!” she was saying excitedly, flushed and beaming, her arm sweeping wide to indicate the scene.

Jamie was standing in the middle of a broad annex, surrounded by a half dozen huge, white barns. Horses—dozens of them—were visible all around, ridden by youngsters, led by grooms, trotting about in paddocks, leaping over white rails in larger pens, and even more tasks that Jamie could not properly place. The whole place was positively abuzz with activity, and all of it having to do with huge, magnificent horses.

“Fernacre belongs to Marian Harper and her husband, Tom,” Claire was explaining rapidly as she led him forward toward one of the barns. “Marian from the hospital, you remember? They do a bit of everything here: boarding, lessons for children, jumping training and competitions; anything the well-to-do of Boston care to do with their prize horses, they can do it here!”

She stopped in the entryway to one of the barns, which alone housed ten beautiful beasts. “They do also cater to less competitive folk who just want to enjoy being on horseback now and again, so, I thought we could spend the day riding! That is—only if you want to…” she added hastily when he did not at once respond, her smile faltering, “I thought—something outdoors might be—you know, after being cooped up in hospital and being so miserable with the flu, and—”

He grabbed her around the legs, just under the buttocks, and hoisted her—shrieking—into the air. He twirled them around a few times until they were both laughing foolishly. She was clutching the back of his neck as if for dear life but was beaming down at him with her bottom lip caught between her teeth. “Like it?”

He let her slide slowly down his body, then, though only far enough that her mouth was within reach. He kissed her, long and thoroughly, not caring about the giggles and looks they were getting from passing folk.

From the way her chest was heaving when he at last released her, Jamie gathered that his reaction had indeed been satisfactorily enthusiastic.
Jamie pulled Cornflower’s reins sharply to whirl around, both of them heaving, but so very alive as they surveyed the scene from the crest of the hill.

He and Claire had ridden for hours and hours up and down the wooded trails surrounding Fernacre, enjoying the glorious day and a wee picnic by a shaded brook. In addition to the outing itself, Claire had gifted him with a fine pair of heeled leather boots and a broad hat, so he looked “like a proper Kansas Cow Boy!” He did indeed feel like such a being: exotic and strange, to him…and wonderful.

Claire had turned back a quarter of an hour ago, tired and needing water. Small wonder, as her mount had not taken to her as readily as Cornflower had submitted to Jamie; in fact, Claire had had twice the work as himself, by nature of the beast constantly needing to be redirected from its whims. Claire had encouraged Jamie to stay out as long as he wished, though. He’d meant at first to demur and accompany her back to the barns; but when the wooded path had opened up just that moment onto an open, hilly pasture, Claire had given him a grin and a “Go on, then, Fraser,” and he’d been carried on a wind out and away into the sea of grass.

He couldn’t even express how good it felt to ride again. His every muscle tingled with life, ached with the magnificence of heavy use. His chest felt broad and completely full with air for the first time in ages. He’d last been on a horse on the ride from Lallybroch to Craigh na Dun, but there had been no happiness in that ride. Years before that—after the confines of life in the cave—there had been the Rising, during which he’d plodded from battle to battle on Donas; but the last time he’d ridden for pleasure? Jamie honestly couldn’t recall it. This, though…this was joy. Feeling the wind in his hair as he pushed the horse to her breaking point, riding not in pursuit, nor in flight, or of necessity, just because he wished to.

He felt utterly renewed; and it wasn’t just from the illness or the shock of hospitalization. Being outdoors and riding was healing something deep within Jamie; something he couldn’t quiet express. He felt right. He felt…known.

Jamie leaned down and whispered to the mare, “What say you, lass? Can we beat yon flock of starlings to the other end of the pasture?”

Cornflower snorted in a “ye’ll be doubting me then, wee fool?” kind of way, and was flying down the hill in a moment, both of them pounding for the horizon.

By the time he reached the stables once more, Claire’s headstrong mare had already been rubbed down and deposited back in her stall. Not seeing his headstrong wife about, Jamie led Cornflower into the cool dark of the stable block and began removing her gear, waving off the lad who had scurried forward to do so.

It was a well-appointed barn, with (to Jamie’s eye) luxurious finishes, a dozen-odd occupied stalls on one side, and a large indoor paddock on the other. Standing in the paddock were two men, one of whom Jamie recognized as Marian’s husband, Tom. Claire had pointed him out across the way earlier that morning, though since he had been occupied at the time, they’d not had the chance to be introduced.

Evidently, it was a very busy day for Tom, for he was occupied once more, seemingly negotiating the purchase of the chestnut-brown yearling being ridden around the enclosure by a man with sandy-blond hair. The latter was yelling loudly across his shoulder as he rode, rather forcefully extolling the many qualities and impeccable pedigree of the animal.

Something about this exchange was wearing on Tom, for he raised his hands suddenly and shook his
head, snapping, “For God’s sake, relax, O’Neill, I get it: he’s a good horse.”

“So shall we decide on—"

Tom was already heading toward the gate. “Give me a few minutes to smoke and think on it, for chrissake.”

Shaking his head and muttering to himself, Tom made his way toward the barn door located directly next to the stall where Jamie stood grooming Cornflower. With an enormously weary sigh, Tom leaned his back against the door frame, lit a cigarette from a box in his breast pocket, and took in a deep drag.

Jamie gave the man a minute or two in peace, looked once more across to the chestnut mount, made up his mind, and finally said aloud, “Begging your pardon, but ye willna be wanting that one, Mr. Harper.”

Tom jumped and dropped his cigarette. “Oh, er—I—I’m sorry…Have we met?” The man looked genuinely embarrassed at the thought of not recalling their acquaintance.

“Not properly, no: James Fraser, sir,” Jamie said hastily, suppressing the lifelong instinct to bow and opting instead for a cordial incline of the head. “Claire Beauchamp is my wife.”

Comprehension dawned over the man’s kind features. “Good Lord, of course! The Great Scot who came back from the dead!” He came forward eagerly to clasp Jamie’s hand. “Wonderful to meet you, really! Did Corny treat you well?” he said, with a nod at the mare.

“Aye, she did, that,” Jamie said, rubbing Corny on the nose. “And you’ve a verra fine establishment, here, Mr. Harper.”

“Please, call me Tom. And it’s seen finer days, I’ll tell you that much,” he said with a grimace and another pull on the cigarette, which he had frugally retrieved from the ground. “Ridiculously short-staffed with all-time high in demand for boarders and lessons. Don’t have an effing moment to take a shit in peace, s’cuse my French.”

Jamie smiled, and after giving Tom leave to call him by his own first name, said, “Ye do seem that wee bit harried, if you dinna mind my remarking upon it.”

Tom laughed mirthlessly. “Harried and in need of a stiff drink.” The man suddenly furrowed his brows. “What did you mean, ‘I won’t be wanting that one’? Did you mean the thoroughbred, there?”

Jamie nodded. “I dinna think he’d do ye much good, if it’s breeding or strenuous sporting you have in mind for him, down the road.”

Tom raised his eyebrows. “No? He’s of prime stock from a top competitor of mine…”

“Aye, he’s a bonnie lad, to be sure, verra well-built and wi’ a lovely coat and teeth, to be sure.”

“So…?” Tom said invitingly, but with a pointed look that suggested Jamie get to the point.

Jamie closed Cornflower’s stall and walked over to the paddock fence where the blond man stood with his horse, impatient. “If I may?” Jamie said to the man.

Reluctantly, the seller brought the mount over to Jamie and Tom. Jamie entered the enclosure and jumped smoothly up into the saddle, taking the beast a circuit or two at a moderate trot. All the while, he spoke low in Gaelic to the creature. Oh, and you’re a bonnie one, lad, and sweet to be sure.
Dinna pay heed to the words I’ll speak against ye. You’re a worthy beast, no matter what, aye?

He stopped once more in front of the two men, and gestured for Tom to come closer. “Hear how heavily he’s breathing? No yearling should be snorting and heaving like that after a naught but wee jaunt around the paddock. I wager he’ll have a weak heart or some other ailment, despite his fine build.”

“Well, son of a gun,” Tom said as Jamie dismounted, nodding as he examined the horse again. “I’m so plumb worn-out I didn’t even notice, but I think you might be right!”

The seller looked livid and as though he’d like to strangle Jamie with his bare hands. He also was not nearly quick enough to offer a rebuttal.

This was not lost on Tom, either, who turned to the seller with a smug, “Well, you heard the man, Fred. Come back next week with some better investments for me, huh?”

Tom turned away from the enraged O’Neill and looked at Jamie as though he were the aforementioned stiff drink. “Could I convince you to check out the rest of the herd with me, Jamie? If I’ve purchased any more weak links in my exhaustion haze these last few weeks, I’d like to know about them head-on!”

“Tell me truly: did ye plan it, Sassenach?”

“Hmm?” she said, looking up from the road. “Plan what? The trip to the barns? Of course I did! We didn’t end up here by accident, did we?”

“No, not that. Did ye have it settled wi’ Tom that he should take pity on me and give me a job?”

She looked genuinely affronted. “No! Jamie, no, I swear!” she said, turning to look him in the eye for a moment. “I’ll admit that I did have it in the back of my mind that Fernacre and working with the horses might be to your liking, but I didn’t mention the notion to Marian, let alone Tom!” She gave him a sudden beaming smile. “That was completely on your own merit, my love!”

Tom hadn’t been exaggerating about his dire lack of staff. In the past three weeks, he’d had two key employees resign for family reasons. After seeing firsthand the extent of Jamie’s knowledge and experience with horse, he’d offered him a job on the spot…and after a quick conference with Claire, who was glowing with the news, Jamie had accepted.

“You’re no’ ashamed, then, to tell folk you’re marrit to a stable boy?” He tried to say it with the air of making a joke, though he did genuinely wish to be assured of the answer.

“Stable boy, pah! My husband is a chief manager at one of Boston’s most sought-after equestrian clubs! That’s no small potatoes, darling!”

Jamie laughed, taken aback by the strange expression.

“But even if you were a stable boy,” she said fondly, reaching over and taking his hand. “I married you the first time thinking you were nothing more than a stable boy and an outlaw, didn’t I?”

Jamie squeezed her hand. “Ye didna have much choice in the matter, as I recall,” he teased.

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Jamie squeezed her hand. “Ye didna have much choice in the matter, as I recall,” he teased.
“Well,” Jamie said, reaching across to squeeze her knee, now, “when I’m feeling down on myself in future, I’ll always remember how ye chose marriage to me over going to prison. ‘Tis verra flattering to a person’s manly sensibilities.”

She rolled her eyes and snorted in good humor.

“But truly, love, are you excited about this?” she asked a minute later. “I don’t mean to make you feel anything more than you do, but–”

“Aye. Truly, I feel most pleased about it, mo chridhe.”

He did. This kind of work (supporting Tom in overseeing the care and procurement of the Fernacre stock as a whole) was precisely of the honest, simple, and peaceful sort he and Claire had discussed that first morning of their honeymoon. He felt confident that he could both enjoy and be proud of it, and if it helped support his family as well, it was heaven-sent.

On top of all these considerations, he felt a thrill of true joy at the thought of teaching his precious Brianna to ride at Fernacre, in a few years’ time. Still more, he dreamed of perhaps having her spend afternoons with him there regularly, once she was old enough not to need constant supervision. To think of his nighean ruidh growing strong and capable as the years passed, there with him in the open air, in his world…

“Aye,” he said again, with the depth of all this feeling thick in his throat, “’Tis…more than perfect.”

“Good!” Claire said, not bothering to keep the excited triumph from her voice. A few minute later, she made an on odd noise of realization. “You know what this means, though?”

“What’s that, then?”

She ground the Van—CAR— to a halt at a traffic signal and turned to him with a mischievous gleam of barely-suppressed (and not a little vindictive) glee in her whisky eyes.

“It means that you, my love, are going to have to learn to DRIVE!”

Chapter End Notes

song: Goodnight Irene (The Weavers)
Every Day and Everything

Brianna, the light of his life, the joy of his heart, wrapped her arms around his neck in the sweetest of hugs, and declared:

“Pee-yooooo, Da!”

“Well, and ye dinna smell like a bed of roses yourself!” said Jamie, startled into laughter. He lifted her above his head and took a dramatic, tickling sniff. “Och, no, I’m forsworn: ye smell verra sweet, cub.” He kissed her repeatedly on the cheeks and neck until she began wriggling–giggling–to escape. “Ye’d best get accustomed to the smell o’ horses, a nighean.” He gave her one more noisy kiss and set her down. “Where’s your Mama, then?”

“In here,” came Claire’s voice from the kitchen, and Jamie’s whole body stiffened, as though reacting to a snapped twig in the dark. Was he only imagining that she sounded strange? Strained… worn…? Tired, perhaps? Well, and he was tired himself, was he not, after the day’s labor and the two long Car rides with Hank? Perhaps it had been a hard shift at the hospital today. Aye, surely that was it. Still, he followed Brianna into the kitchen somewhat braced.

“Hello, there, sweetheart,” she said over her shoulder, reaching for salt with an apologetic, “Just one moment, alright?” She had already changed from her uniform into a cotton shirt and slacks and was stirring something on the Stove top.

He came up behind her and placed a careful, tender hand on the small of her back. “It’s verra kind of ye to see to supper, Sassenach,” he said, genuinely thankful, as he knew cooking was not her joy.

“Penelope saw to it, truthfully,” she said deprecatingly, placing a lid on the pot and turning into his arms. “I’m just reheating.”

She did look tired, Jamie thought as she embraced him; or perhaps not tired, for he didn’t think lack of sleep had to do with it. She looked… subdued, and that troubled him all the more. Claire nearly always had a glint in her eye: from love, from excitement, from determination after some task needing to be done. In this moment, though, her arms wrapped about him, looking up into his face, she seemed glazed, distant, and Jamie had the distinct impression it was with some effort that she smiled warmly and asked, “Was it a good first day, sweetheart?”

“Aye, it was, at that.” He kissed her forehead and released her. He was still concerned, but did not wish to press her, and so sank down into one of the kitchen chairs. “The tasks of conducting business havena changed o’ermuch in two hundred years, from what I’ve seen of it, at least as far as Fernacre is concerned. There are still ledgers to keep, inventories to maintain, records to properly file, and such. Made more telephone calls in one day than I thought I should make in a lifetime,” he said with a laugh, “but it got easier as the day went along.”

“Who were you having to phone?” she asked with the same note of forced cheer as she knelt to check on Bree, who was playing happily with George the toy rabbit on the floor next to the Frigidaire.

“Oh, well, mostly the folk from whom we purchase stock, so Tom could introduce me. The rapport makes a great deal of difference in transactions, ken. That was most o’ the morning. For a time, I was worried the whole of my position would entail sitting at the wee desk…” He paused for a moment, watching Claire’s back, which stayed (carefully?) turned to him as she went to wash her hands. “…but I did get outdoors for the afternoon, inspecting the stock and making my own notes about
their ages and breeds and such—to determine what our purchasing priorities should be for the
upcoming months; and then ended the day back indoors wi’ damn tedious invoicing,” he said, with a
mock shudder he hoped would make her laugh.

She took the cue and chuckled, turning to face him at last, but the mirth had not reached her eyes.
“Do you think you’ll enjoy the job, love?” she said, putting her hands in her wee pockets. “Think
you can be happy in it?”

“Aye, I do,” he said with a smile, feeling a swell of excited contentment, despite his disquiet over her
mood. “Aye,” he said, more emphatically, hoping to reassure her, just in case anxiety over his new
position could possibly be the cause. “There’s plenty of the old world about it, but enough of the
new to keep me learning.”

“I’m so happy for you, sweetheart,” she said, bending down to kiss him, and Jamie could tell that she
meant it.

Nonetheless, as she turned, when she surely thought he couldn’t see, he saw her face fall. “Claire,
mo chridhe?” he said gently, catching her hand. “What’s happened?”

There was a moment when Jamie thought she was going to pull away and declare everything to be
perfectly fine. He could see her mouth working in deliberation; but as she turned to him, she seemed
to deflate before his eyes. Without a word, she sank down onto his lap and put her arms around his
neck, curling against him like a child.

“Hey, now, hey,” he breathed, pulling her close against his chest. “Oh, my sweet lass…”

She wasn’t crying, just breathing heavily and clinging to him very tightly, burying her face in his
neck and shoulder. “Just…hold me?” she said, voice tight.

“Always, mo nighean donn,” he said. He cupped her head and rested his lips in her hair, closing his
eyes and rocking them gently, praying.

“Ma-ma?” came a small voice a few minutes later, causing them both to open their eyes. Brianna
was looking up with stricken concern and patting Claire’s bum. “Ma-ma? Ah-sad?”

Claire straightened a bit so she could reach down and touch Brianna’s cheek. “No, no, not sad,
lovey. Mama just wanted to have a cuddle with Da.”

“M’okay, Sacknap!” the lass said, satisfied. After giving Claire a parting kiss on the foot, she toddled
off to resume her animated conversation with George.

Jamie and Claire both watched her for a time as an excuse not to break the silence. Finally, though,
Jamie squeezed his wife’s hip. “You are sad, though, aye?”

“Yes,” she whispered, after a long pause, not meeting his eye.

He kissed her cheek and temple, slowly. I’m here. I love you. Don’t be afraid, my love. “Tell me?”
he said aloud.

Slowly, without speaking, she reached into the pocket of of her trousers and pulled out an envelope.

Jamie inhaled sharply. “Jesus…He wrote back, then?”

_Claire had shown him her letter before posting it, that second day together, the day before their_
With so much joy between them, it had seemed callow not to send a gesture of thanks to the man that had made their life-altering reunion possible; and yet each word had been a wound in her heart in the writing, no matter how genuinely she meant them.

July 7, 1950

Frank,

I do not know if it is right for me to write you. You might prefer never to have cause to think of me again. I would not blame you, if so, and yet I felt I had to write to you to thank you for each and every one of the gifts that I learned about yesterday, when James Fraser appeared in my kitchen:

Your forgiveness in not pressing charges after what happened at Oxford (Jamie told me what happened, and how badly he must have injured you); the money and tickets (my God, the cost of these alone must have been exorbitant); the passport and birth certificate (I know you risked much in acquiring them: your position, criminal charges).

And the trust for Brianna….Frank, this above all had me floored and in tears. Had you written to me of it before and I’d not seen, ignoring your letters? For the extravagance of this gift, for my shame at my own behavior, my conscience screams in my ear that I must refuse this, that it would be wrong to accept. Jamie, though, asks that I give you the gift of accepting your kindness; so, unless you should choose to rescind (which I give you full permission to do), I will say only thank you, THANK YOU, and God bless you for wishing to see to the care of my daughter. For the selfless love you showed toward the child that I promised you, then ripped away: I am grateful; I am touched; I am speechless.

What you did for Jamie, for me, was beyond what any person in your position would be obliged to do. Please know how deeply, utterly grateful I am for what you have done by giving Jamie the means to find me. You’ve given me my husband. You’ve given Brianna her father. Truly, you have given me more than I ever could have dreamed of, everything that I have mourned and buried. You’ve given me life again.

I’ve very nearly scratched that last paragraph out, for it must seem little more than salt in a wound, to prattle on about my happiness that came so directly at the expense of your own. So too does it feel woefully incommensurate with the deed. “Grateful”; “Touched”—these are flimsy, disgusting little words that do not begin to reflect the depth of my feeling; and yet I leave the above sentences where they stand, for it would be even more of a disservice to allow your actions to go down as casual good deeds or simple kindnesses.

You gave me everything, Frank. Everything. And whether or not my words can carry the intensity of how I feel today as I sit here writing to you, please hear me: I am eternally, brokenly, on my knees thankful to you.

And above all, I am sorry. I’m sorry for everything I took from you. Every minute. Every year. Past and future. For everything I did to hurt you, I’m so deeply, terribly, truly sorry.

You deserve far better, Frank, and I wish every happiness upon your life.

Claire
Jamie squeezed Claire tight with one arm and turned Frank’s reply over in his free hand. The flap was still sealed. He brought both arms around her and held her close for a long time before saying gently, “What is the worst that this letter could contain?”

“I don’t know,” she said, voice quavering.

“Ye do know.” He ran his fingers lightly over her back, speaking softly but without hesitation. “What is it ye fear he’s said, mo chridhe?”

“All the…I don’t know, Jamie, I just– had planned things so that we’d never speak again. Now, I have to…” She took a deep, ragged breath, “…face all the the terrible things he thinks about me…and the fact that they’re incontestably true.”

That she’d broken his heart thrice over and left him to pick up the pieces. Jamie remembered the rage and the pain in Frank Randall’s face. He knew the truth of how the man suffered.

“Could ye carry on,” Jamie asked with no trace of mockery, “if he told ye all his grievances against you?”

“Yes,” she said after a long silence.

He rubbed her hip slowly. “That is no’ to say it willna be painful…but you are strong enough, even for this.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. She took the letter from his hand and rose, walking over to the sink. There came the sound of ripping paper, the whiff of the letter being withdrawn. She stood hunched for a moment, steeling herself over the paper in her hand. Then, she turned and held it back out to him. “Will you read to me?”

Jamie took the letter and unfolded it, his heart racing, seeing at once that it was far shorter than her own message had been. God be with us, he prayed silently.

“Dear Claire…”

Jamie stopped and glanced up nervously. She was leaned with her back against the counter facing him, but staring at the floor. He went on.

“Every day since we parted, I have grieved; I have wished; and I have raged.”

“Jesus,” Claire whispered, squeezing her eyes tight as if to shut the pain out.

“But…”

Jamie’s breath caught in his throat and he had to swallow hard before reading the next words.

“…everything I have done since the day you and I met, I would do again, and gladly. Everything.”

Her head came up, stunned, and she made a small whimper, her eyes glassy with tears.

Jamie finished the letter very quietly.

“I wish every happiness for you, as well, Claire. And for your family.

Truly,
She put her face in both hands and wept, her strong, narrow shoulders hunched over with the immensity of Randall’s words.

Jamie stood and went to her, hugging her gently to him. “He wishes ye well,” he crooned. “You couldna wish for better than that, aye?”

She struggled to get a deep breath through the tears. “I really do want him to be happy—I do!”

“I know….I know ye do,” he said, rocking her and smoothing her hair.

“Until he’s—happy—finds someone who makes him—I’ll always feel…my fault…” She trailed off, crying harder.

Jamie kissed her hair. “Ye canna hold yourself accountable for his happiness, Sassenach. We might pray for it, true, and we ought, but ye must release yourself from the burden of it.”

She nodded against his chest and let the rest of her tears fall silently against his chest, the peace of the kitchen disturbed only by the sounds of Brianna’s play at their feet.

Suddenly, Claire stiffened and pulled back to look him in the eye, her own wild. “I love you, Jamie,” she said, laying her cool hands on his face and giving him a little shake.

“And I love you.”

“I love you,” she said again, insistently, almost violently, “—and I—I would never—” She shook her head, hard. “You should never think that—I could ever—”

That she would ever do this to him. Leave him. Love another.

“NO, mo ghraidh,” he said firmly. “NO. You loved Frank Randall; it would be wrong for either of us to pretend otherwise….but you’d never have left him if you’d had something like this between you…. God, never!” She dug her fingertips into his arms, lips working furiously as she tried to keep her emotion in check. "You and I,” he went on, “we’re different, aye? We’ve always been different. That kind of heartbreak…that damage and pain: they willna be for us, Claire. Not ever.”

“But hhhow…” She exhaled heavily on the word, the pent-up distress rushing out of her, such that she had to gasp for air to speak. “…how can you be sure?”

“I’m sure of my own heart…and I’m sure of yours, mo chridhe. There’s nothing on earth to which I stake my faith more than that.”

“Oh, Jamie,” she breathed, “Jamie, my love…I don’t want to believe we could ever—ever—” She made a sound of anger and pain in her throat. “But I thought I knew my own heart when I married Frank, too…and look at how…” She couldn’t finish the sentence, just clapped a hand over her mouth and shook with weeping.

The lump in Jamie’s throat burned and choked him with doubt and fear (Jesus, could she)…

…then vanished; utterly, completely vanished.

“Ye ask me how I can be sure? Because the first time I took ye to the stones, after Cranesmuir, ye chose me, freely. You felt sorry about Frank, and couldna forget him entirely, true, but from then on, it was me…not him. Because the second time I took ye there, and ye went back to him, it was still
me, aye?…even with him there and loving and willing before ye, ye loved me.” He took her face, her lovely, red, tear-streaked face in both hands. “Because in life and death and beyond time, you’ve chosen to affirm that I’m yours just as you’re mine.”

He opened his mouth to speak the words, but they fell from her lips first. Their promise:

“‘Til our life shall be done.”

[to be continued]
“OH!!! Oh, honey, you scared the bejeezus out of me!!!!”

Jamie had nearly come out of his skin, himself, at the skelloch that had greeted his entry through the front door moments before. In fact, he’d reached instinctively for the absent dirk at his belt, feeling an irrational but deep-rooted panic at finding it two hundred years gone.

Even so, he recovered quickly and hastened into the living room. “I’m terribly sorry to have startled you, Penelope,” he said, stooping to retrieve the knitting Ms. Byrd had dropped onto the floor.

“Oh, nothing to fret over, Mr. Jamie,” she said, breathing heavily with her hand over her bosom, but smiling now, eyes crinkled with affection. “It’s just I wasn’t expecting—” She checked the clock on the wall, a flicker of alarm crossing her face once more. “Goodness, it’s only 3:00! Is everything alright. Are you getting sick again? Do you need the doctor?”

“Oh, no, dinna fash, a nighean,” he said, squeezing her hand. “Hank (the farmhand with whom I ride to Fernacre, ken?) had an appointment wi’ a Dentist in town for 4 o’clock that he’d forgotten ‘til the last moment. Rather than find me someone else to get a ride with, Tom said just to take the rest of the afternoon ‘for myself.’”

“Oh, how lovely!”

He gave a small shrug. “I’m no’ accustomed to being at my leisure, to be honest... but I wagered you wouldna mind me taking Brianna off your hands for few hours? I was thinking we’d go to the park, perhaps. It’s a fine day for it,” he said, gesturing toward the bay window behind the sofa, which showed the hot, blue day beyond.

Penelope’s face twisted with regret. “Oh, Mr. Jamie, little Bree’s just gone down for a nap. Normally, she’d be waking up right about now, and typically I’d say you could wake her in any case, but, OH, she was ornery as all get-out the whole day, so I really think waking her would be a bad idea, and—”

Jamie cut off this stream of anxious apology and assured Penelope it was no great thing, that she was perfectly correct that the lass needed rest; but in truth he was disappointed. He enjoyed the work at Fernacre and was very glad of it, but he missed his wee lass all the more for being gone from her during the day.

“What can I make for you?” Penelope said, bustling toward the kitchen with the conviction of a woman who knows for a fact that good food can cure anything.

“Please dinna trouble yourself,” he called, following her in haste to prevent her preparing a restorative four-course meal for him. “Truly, I’m not all that hungr—”

“Nonsense,” she said firmly, already preparing a plate for him. “Chocolate chip banana bread fresh from the oven. Warmed with honey butter, it can’t be beat, if I do say so myself!”

“You’re a verra stubborn woman, Penelope.” He took the proffered plate, bending to kiss the dear lady’s weathered cheek. “And if ye ever should leave us, the Frasers would all shrivel up in despair.”

He ate standing in front of the living room bookshelf (she was right—the sweet bread couldn’t be beat, warm and soft, dotted with wee morsels of chocolate) perusing Claire’s collection of a dozen or
so books. Most of these were novels, and almost all published in the nineteenth century. *Treasure Island. A Tale of Two Cities. Pride and Prejudice. Jane Eyre.* He checked once more to be sure. Aye, he’d read them all, now.

“Does Claire keep books anywhere else in the house?” he asked hopefully, poking his head back into the kitchen.

“Not that I know of,” Penelope said, after considering for a moment. “But the library is only four blocks away, if you want something new.”

“Oh, aye?” Jamie said, perking up considerably at that. “I didna realize there was a university so close.”

“No, no, just the local public library,” she said, laughing as she dried her hands on a towel. “Do they not have those in Scotland?”

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Jamie could have died a happy man, standing there in the public library. So many books, on every topic imaginable, all beautifully bound and organized. He walked around in awe, reading the placards that denoted the sections.

The history aisles drew him at once, promising knowledge of all of recorded time, of all corners of the world. Asia. Africa. Islands of the Pacific Ocean whose names he’d never heard. Countless volumes having to do with northern Europe: Sweden, the lowlands, France, England, Ireland…..Scotland…

His fingertips hovered over the spine of *Culloden and the Clearances: the Destruction of Highland Culture in the 18th-19th Centuries.*

No…Not yet.

On and on the aisles went. Literature. Science. Periodicals. Children’s books. It was a small building, but it must have housed thousands upon thousands of tomes. A posting in the entry hall had boasted dozens of libraries throughout the Boston area. The sheer wealth of knowledge available to any person that cared to walk a few paces from his home to inquire after it…

*But dinna let your eyes outstrip your wallet, man.*

“Begging your pardon, miss,” he said to the nearest employee, who was occupied with restocking the shelves, “Might you be so kind as to direct me toward a price schedule?”

She looked puzzled for a moment, no doubt surprised by his unusual accent, then she smiled back. “A library card is ten cents, sir.” She gave a kind nod of the head and turned back to her work.

“And the volumes?” Jamie pressed patiently, “What is the rental fee per book, if ye please?”

She gave him a look of dumbfounded amusement, speaking slowly (but in no way mocking) as though to a young child. “Well, once you have the card, you can check out any book for free.”

Jamie stared at her, now he the dumbfounded one. “*Truly?*”

“Yes, of course!” she laughed. “As many as you want… as long as you bring them back in two weeks.”
Good God, what a time this was…. when ten cents gives a man access to practically all useful knowledge of the known world.

An hour later, when the same kind lass assisted him with purchasing a library card and stamping the books he’d chosen, she gave him a bemused look (something of a specialty with her, it seemed). “You’ve got quite the selection here!”

He had limited himself to a half-dozen books for this excursion, including: The Industrial Revolution: how the nineteenth century changed the world; The World Wars: (1914-1946); and Recent Innovations in Communication Technology. She placed Flora and Fauna of South America in the paper bag she’d been kind enough to provide for him. “Are you going on vacation or something?”

“No,” he said with a smile, handing her the final tome (a novel, with the most intriguing title of Journey to the Center of the Earth), “it’s just that I’ve a verra great many things to learn.”

As Jamie passed the park on his way back to the house, he checked the wristwatch that Claire had bought for him: nearly 5:00. Claire would be home soon…but he was far too excited to wait.

He sat on a park bench and reached into his sack for the book he’d been most elated to find: The Automobile: its History and Proper Usage (1949 edition).

He flipped through the pages hastily. He would come back to read about the events of the machine’s invention later; the only one thing he wished to learn about at present began on page 68.

**STARTING THE ENGINE**

The carburetor is fitted with an automatic choke which correctly proportions the fuel mixture during the starting and warm-up period.

1. Place gear shift lever in neutral position.
2. Depress clutch pedal, and–

He felt his enthusiasm being stabbed by the tremors of doubt such novelties always provoked in him at first meeting. The words on the page might as well have been a foreign language to him.

“But no harder than Latin or Greek or Hebrew, Fraser,” he muttered sternly to himself. “And ye didna learn those save by study and hard work.”

He removed the small notebook from his pocket and opened to the most recent entry. It was naught but a few lines jotted down in the men’s room after the lunchtime conversation with Tom and some of the other lads; a conversation during which he’d nodded and said a great deal of “Aye, certainly,” but kept quiet:

*America’s President: Trueman (sp?)*

President= powerful minister in lieu of king; elected by the peoples’ vote; only keeps power for (x) yrs [ask Claire]

He’d been making notations in the wee book for the past several weeks, now, taking care to write always in Gaelic against the possibility that his notes should be discovered and raise questions that had no answer. It was the only way he knew to chip away at the overwhelming immensity of things to be learned, and so far, it had helped tremendously.
Jamie turned to a new page, and utilized the book’s glossary to make sense of page 68.

*Carburetor:* “a device in an internal combustion engine for mixing air with a fine spray of liquid fuel” (*no apparent relation to the driving of vehicle just makes the thing move; same for “choke”*)

*Gear shift lever:* “Should always be placed in neutral position before starting engine. Raise knob and move lever forward for reverse gear and rearward for low gear. Move lever to neutral, depress and slide forward for second gear and rearward for high gear.” (*found on right-hand side of steering wheel*)

With a small laugh, and with the remembered reek of what the three Americans had called “weed” in his nostrils, he jotted a title at the top of the section:

*Horseless wagon of certain death.*
August, 1950

“Alright, ALRIGHT,” I said in mock exasperation to the blooms as I pulled out a particularly intransigent nest of weeds, “you’ll be growing free and easy soon enough.”

I’d gotten home from work an hour or two early, today, and was taking advantage of the opportunity to tend the front flower beds. Decorative flowers always took a backseat to the herbs in the back garden, if I were being perfectly honest; however, summer had finally crisped and weed-choked the impatients to the point at which even I could ignore them no longer. “Hold your bloody horses,” I lectured the flowers again as I nestled fresh soil around the area.

“Maaaaa-ma,” came a rather scornful giggle to my right.

“Ha, you’re one to talk, missy,” I said, sitting back on my haunches to put gloved hands on my hips in mock indignation. “You talk to inanimate objects all the time. Far more than Mama, I’ll wager.”

She had been “helping” me with the gardening; that is to say, getting herself as filthy as possible. She covered her mouth to suppress her giggles, gurgled a string of happy syllables, and let herself topple heedlessly into my arms. I caught her, scooped her against my chest, and showered her with kisses, both of us smelling of sweat and soil. “My goodness, Bree, any more dirt on you and I’ll be able to plant you!”

“Nothing wrong with a little dirt,” said Penelope brightly from the front stoop, where she sat reading a romance novel while she supervised Bree. “It’s good for kids to have some grit about them.”

“Git!” proclaimed Brianna enthusiastically.

“No, no, lovey,” I laughed. “That’s not a very nice word. It’s g-rrrrr-it.”

“GIT!” she agreed, extricating herself and plopping contentedly back down in the flower bed.

“Oh, well,” Penelope said fondly, “I suppose there are worse insults to pick up.”

“She’ll have no lack of them, with two languages and three nationalities to pull from,” I agreed.

Just before 6:00, the sound of an approaching vehicle made all three of us look up. I gave an overly-dramatic gasp for Brianna’s benefit. “I wonder who that could be!”

She froze mid-task (stuffing the pockets of her romper full-to-bursting with soil), made a comically round “O” with her mouth, eyebrows raised as high as they could go, and whispered, “S’iz-Da?”

At my grin and nod, she leapt to her feet and tore headlong toward Hank’s yellow pickup truck that was just pulling into the driveway.

“Ohhhh no you don’t, little smudge!” I laughed, catching her around the middle and sweeping her up off the ground. She cackled with the joy of the sudden movement, then squealed “Da!” at the driver’s side door that had just opened.

“No, that’s not Da, baby, that’s Mr. Hank!” But as I looked up, I saw that she was, in fact, correct. James Alexander Malcolm Mackenzie Fraser was stepping down—cool as you bloody well please—from the driver’s seat.
“Jamie!” I said, slowly and shrilly. “Did you—\textit{DRIVE}?"

“Oh, aye,” he said with an attempt at casualness that made me snort with joy. I could see the corner of his mouth twitching with a proud smile as he plucked Brianna from my arms. “Hank’s been showing me the way of it. Just a few minutes each day at Fernacre, ken?”

“Took him a day or two to really get the hang of it,” said a grinning Hank, who had exited from the passenger’s side and come around, looking \textit{almost} as proud as Jamie. “Those foreign models he learned on across the pond must be helluva different beast—Jamie here barely could tell the pedals from the wheel, at first!”

I exchanged a furtive grin with Jamie. A different beast indeed: a horse, to be specific.

“But he picked it up fast,” Hank went on, tipping his cap to Penelope, who had come closer to join in the congratulations, “and today I threw him the keys and said, ‘take us home, bud!’ Didn’t crash or run a stop-sign even the once!”

“After the way you were green all the way to Cape Cod,” Penelope said. “I’d have thought you’d never set foot in a car again!”

“See, that’s the strange thing about it,” Jamie said, bouncing Bree in his arms as she tugged on his ears, “I dinna seem to get queasy when \textit{I’m} the one doing the driving.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” I said, crossing my arms. “Think the same might apply to boats as well?” I teased. “\textit{Captain} Fraser?”

“It certainly might,” he said, leaning down to smile at me with one eyebrow raised, “but I’ll go to my death before I test the theory voluntarily.” He bent and kissed me.

“I am truly \textit{very} impressed, Jamie,” I said.

“Been reading up on it—wanted to surprise ye. I’ll still have to study up to pass the written test, Hank says, but—”

“I’m \textit{proud} of you, sweetheart.”

He smiled. “Thank you, \textit{Sassenach},” he said, in that soft way that indicated such depth of feeling I wanted to cry from happiness.

A few minutes later as Hank got back in the truck (“See you tomorrow, bud!”) and pulled out of the driveway, Penelope went inside to get Brianna cleaned up, and Jamie followed me to the side yard ostensibly to assist with filling up the watering cans. Before I could bend to turn on the spigot, though, he had placed a firm hand on my hip and pressed me against the rough brick of the house, bending back my head and kissing me so intensely that I dropped the can.

Pulling back, a long time later, panting rather heavily, he said huskily, “You are so very beautiful, \textit{mo nighean donn}.”

“Dirt and all?”

He smiled and touched my cheek. “You forget…you were positively \textit{filthy} the first time I laid eyes on ye, and it didna discourage me then. In fact, if we werena so close quartered wi’ neighbors,” he whispered, bending to nip the tender skin of my neck, “I should like to have you \textit{right here in the grass}.”
Despite the heat of the day, I shivered. “You would, eh?” I said, running my hands along the broad expanse of his back. He smelled rather like he had at our first encounter—of sweat and horses—and it wasn’t dampening my arousal, either.

“Aye...None so fragrant as heather, grass;” he said, softly, working his way down toward my breasts, “but God,” he breathed, “to see you naked in the sunlight all surrounded by the green...”

He straightened and kissed me thoroughly, one hand sliding down to squeeze my arse, making a sound deep in his throat that raised goosebumps up and down my body.

“Well, then,” I said raggedly, “Anytime you want to take me camping...” I grinned. “You can drive us to a lovely patch of grass....and I’ll be all yours.”
Not Yet

Chapter Summary

from the tumblr prompt: "I was reading your amazing flood my mornings post yesterday and a naughty thought came to mind: what would jamie's reaction be to prophylactics? Thank you!"

September, 1950

“Erm…Jamie? Did I…break you?”

We had just finished making love and I’d closed my eyes, feeling sensation rippling across my body and my blackened vision sparking like heat lightning. Satisfied and exhausted, I’d opened my eyes to see Jamie (still inside me) looking down in a kind of wild, fascinated horror, face rigid as though someone had put a knife against his throat.

“Jamie?” I said again, giving him a poke in the belly, “Have your English flown away?” I asked with a grin in my pidgin Gaelic.

This seemed to bring him back to his senses, for he blinked, shook his head to clear it, and murmured an apologetic, “No, no, mo chridhe, I’m alright.” He pulled himself out of me and sat kneeling on the bed between my legs. “I’m sorry, I just realized that—” He halted again, gaping wordlessly and running his fingers backward through his hair in agitation.

“Out with it, lad,” I said, laughing at the strangeness of seeing that familiar gesture in his now-laughably-short hair. I pulled the coverlet across to cover my naked body, still cozily exhausted.

“When you talked about wanting another bairn,” he said slowly, “ye said ‘not yet,’ aye?”

I froze.

Now? Could I tell him now? Was this the right time?

“Well, yes, I suppose I did, or something to that effect,” I said carefully, hearing alarm bells sound when his nostrils flared and his mouth went taut. “I don’t remember the exact—”

“But have we no’ been trying in effect these last two months?”

“Ohhhhh,” I said, understanding.

“It’s only I got a wave of panic, just then,” he said, the dismay clear in his voice, “that ye might get wi’ child before you’re ready…and it’s only— I wondered…if I ought not to come to your bed—lie wi’ ye—until…until then.”

I swept up onto my knees before him and stopped his mouth with a kiss. Pulling back, I held his face in my hands. “You’re so very sweet, my love.”

“Sweet?” he said darkly. “Damnably careless.” He made a scoffing sound deep in his throat, and his face contorted as though he were trying to hold back an explosion. “Claire, I’m…so sorry. What
must ye think of me?"

“Dinna fash,” I said, an an exaggerated accent I hoped would make him laugh. “I’ve been taking precautions.”

His eyebrows went high in shock. “Precautions?”

Oof, a bloody great SLEW of minefield talks to be had this night, it seems.

…and quite the field indeed, when the prospect of discussing birth control with an eighteenth-century CATHOLIC husband could be deemed the lesser of the mines!

After a deep breath and a prayer, I succinctly explained the concept of the diaphragm and—following a quick trip to the washroom to excavate and sanitize—showed him the handy little thing.

He said nothing during this; not a word. He was holding it gingerly in the palm of one hand, staring at it as though it were about to go off.

“I’d…like to know how you feel about my using it,” I said cautiously, trying to both scrutinize him and avoid his eye. I was talking too fast in my nervousness, babbling to fill the silence. “The other option is a rubber sleeve that you would have to wear, every time. More or less effective, but I’m told it lessens the sensation quite a bit for the man’s part. This seemed more…well…unobtrusive.”

He opened his mouth, closed it, swallowed, and at last said, full of emotion. “I…think it’s a wonderful invention.”

“Really?” I said, releasing a huge breath in relief and leaning back on the pillows. “Truly? You were so quiet, there, I thought you must be upset with me.”

He shook his head. “I was only thinking about all the women back home–back then who might have benefitted from such a device. All the lives it might have saved.”

“Your mother?” I said gently.

“Well… no, I dinna think so…..” he said, moving to lay on his side facing me. “She and my father, they wanted another bairn, aye?” He rolled the diaphragm meditatively between his fingers. “But I can think of many a woman that would have deemed it a verra great blessing indeed to be free of perpetual pregnancy and risk; to simply enjoy the bairns she had been given already….and no’ be driven to slip a bairn in desperation.”

“Indeed,” I agreed gravely, thinking of how many such women I’d known and seen in my own brief time in the eighteenth-century; women whose lives hung in the balance between the forces of men’s desires, the capabilities of their own bodies, and the dark, desperate ways out that might be offered by the Geillis Duncan of their community. I shuddered involuntarily and cleared my throat. “I did wonder if perhaps you might oppose it on religious grounds.”

“Oh, aye?”

“The Catholic church has opposed contraception time out of mind, you know: circumventing God’s plan for humans ‘being fruitful and multiplying,’ among other objections.”

Jamie furrowed his eyebrows indignantly. “But that puts all the responsibility for things on woman, then, no? She must accept what spunk comes her way and whatever might spring from it, but man may spill it with impunity? Seems horribly unjust to—What are you grinning at like a wee frog, Sassenach? Do ye no’ agree?”
“No, I most certainly do! You should write pamphlets, darling!” I laughed, relieved by his unexpected open-mindedness. “So…you don’t think me wicked for using it?”

“No, Christ, not at all,” he said at once, firmly. “To my mind, if God can forgive a man for sowing his oats hither and thither and whenever he pleases, I’m certain He can forgive a woman for taking prudent precautions against the wily stuff.”

“Wily indeed,” I said, grinning still wider.

I did wonder if Jamie would be quite as progressive in a decade or two when a grown Brianna began exploring her own contraception possibilities….

Ah, well: sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

“And besides,” he said, more softly, “It’s no’ as if we mean to use it so that we might commit sin….If I’m wrong or blasphemous, I’ll answer to God for it on the day of judgement, and gladly, but for the time being, I see no evil in two loving parents waiting for the proper time to bring another bairn into the world.” He kissed me. “No….Ye shall take your precautions until you’re ready…”

Until I’m ready.

One mine down. Another about to explode.

He leaned forward and took my face between his hands, kissing me so tenderly I wanted to cry.

I could feel the pressure of suppressed thoughts ready to burst out from my chest.

“Jamie…but it’s…”

His eyes were crinkled up with mirth. “No ‘buts’ about it. If the pope has a problem wi’ it, he can take it up wi’ me himself.”

Despite my distress, I gave a small laugh, imagining Pope Pius XII in our living room, having it out on the ethics of contraceptives with my formidable husband. “No, that isn’t…Jamie, I need to say something.”

It came out in a rush and he stiffened at once. “What is it, mo chridhe?”

“I had thought…” I grabbed a pillow and wrapped my arms around it, grounding myself to it. “That is…I had thought to wait a time before conceiving again….”

I stopped. He tilted his head to the side, mouth quirked as though repressing a smile. His eyes sparkled with…anticipation? “You…will be thinking differently, now?”

“I want to go to medical school,” I blurted gracelessly.

In the space of one blink of the eye, his glowing features turned to stone. Not angry, nor surprised; just that impassive blank of control that he wielded so skillfully to keep his emotions undetected. He was closed. Present. But closed. “Did ye no’ already have your schooling to be a nurse?” His voice was light and even, but not his own.

Oh, please, God, please let him understand.

“I did,” I began slowly, “but that was for nursing. To be a full MD—medical doctor—you have to go back for more rigorous training; but you have so many more capabilities, for it. You can do surgeries, prescribe care, make the diagnoses that matter! And it…well, it’s expensive, and it takes a good
number of years to complete, but...it’s something I’ve been contemplating for some time, now.”

“Expensive,’ ye say...Can we afford it?” he asked. His face was still inscrutable, his voice calm. He wasn’t looking at me.

“Yes. I’ve still got part of my inheritance left over from Uncle Lamb...and with your salary coming in, we should be able to manage, if we’re careful about our expenditures. They do offer loans for tuition, and if it comes to it, we can take advantage of that. My earning potential will be immensely higher once I’m an MD, so we’ll have no trouble paying them back.”

He didn’t speak, but nodded his head, brows furrowed in thought.

“I can do it, Jamie,” I said, doing my utmost to keep the pleading out of my voice, but hearing it nonetheless. “It’ll be hard for a few years, but we have Penelope, and I can do much of the studying the first two years from home, and—”

He raised a hand.

“Jamie, please listen to me—”

But he put a quelling hand on my arm, squeezing gently. “If ye want this thing, Claire....you’ll have it.”

I sat gaping at him. “Thank you,” I breathed, a huge weight rising from my shoulders. “Truly, thank you.”

He smiled, a little weakly, but with genuine love and feeling. “I’ve no doubt that you’ll be wonderful....and we’ll manage wi’ the details as they come. Together.”

I leaned down and kissed him, running my fingers through his hair. “Jamie....thank you....You have no idea how much this means to me. It’s...God, just...thank you, sweetheart.”

“What would I no’ do for your sake, mo chridhe?” he said, so quietly it was no more than a breath against my cheek.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, steeling myself for the final revelation of the evening. “And so...I’ve been thinking...perhaps we ought not to...put off having the second baby, after all?”

His head snapped up and I watched as—in an instant—his mask cracked and fell away, from first shock and then from the dawning of the most breathtaking smile. “I thought—” He exhaled heavily, stertorous, his whole body seeming to shake as the words tumbled out of him. “Claire, I thought ye were telling me ye’d decided ye’d changed your mind and didna wish to bear another child so you might pursue your schooling!”

“No, no!” I exclaimed, feeling my heart rise like a balloon. “Oh, no, sweetheart! I just meant if the child was a year or two of age before I began medical school, rather than falling pregnant in the midst of things, that would be ide—”

“I was fully prepared to stand by ye if that was your wish, and never say a word more about it, but—” He grabbed me around the waist and pushed me back down on the pillows, kissing me with abandon. When he pulled away, his face above me was filled to bursting with tenderness and joy and love. “Oh, God, Claire,” he groaned, cupping my face with his free hand. “I’m so happy.”

“So am I,” I whispered, breathless with it.
He was beaming. “We’ve a marvelous future, ahead, do we not? You’ll make a verra fine doctor, Sassenach, and I ken already you’re a wonderful mother.” He pulled back and laid a hand gently on my belly. He rubbed tenderly, murmuring something in Gaelic I couldn’t understand.

“There’s nothing in there at the moment, you know.” I said it to be humorous, but my voice cracked.

“But it’s a wonderful thought, aye?” he said, looking up with tears in his eyes. “That ye’ll soon carry a child—our child—in a peaceful time?”

*And you’ll be here for all of it.*

He kissed my hand, then straightened and picked the diaphragm up off the bedspread. He looked down at it for a moment, laughed—a deep, full, throaty incredulous sound—and flung it carelessly over his shoulder, crawling toward me with a deep, significant growl.

“Again?” I said, laughing as he tugged me bodily down beneath him in that way that drove me wild. “ALREADY?”

“Well, it didna count all the times you’ve worn the wee stopper, now did it?” He lowered his head to fasten his lips maddeningly around one nipple before grinning up at me with one eyebrow raised. “We must get on wi’ it, if you’re to become a doctor anytime soon.”
Jamie stood entranced in the middle of the aisle, staring blankly at the sheer wealth of food surrounding him, enough to bury him a dozen times over.

For that moment, he felt nothing but disgust.

Claire had said as much herself, a moment ago. “This is more modern and plentiful than what you’d find in Scotland or even England, these days. They’re still on war rations, you know,” she’d said, selecting a small bag of dried peas. “It’s a bit revolting, if I’m being honest—all this bounty when there are millions starving around the world, but,” she’d shrugged, “it’s here, and it certainly makes things simple.”

Aye, simple.

The simplicity of unending plenty.

The simplicity of more than enough money to partake of it.

The simplicity of a life without famine.

He ran his fingers lightly, slowly, over rows of boxed rices and grains, feeling burning in his throat and ache in his heart. What wouldn’t he give? What agony would he not suffer to see a one-thousandth share of this abundance delivered to Lallybroch? To shower Jenny and Ian’s weans in more food than they could eat in a week? To see Jenny’s hollowed cheeks grow full and rosy once more? To see their faces at sight of the cakes and sweeties? Christ, only to see them…

Ye canna help them, he chided himself, bowing his head. Give thanks, man. Give thanks for your own full belly. Give thanks that Claire and Brianna are safe and fed.

Lord, that they might be safe: my sister and her family.

“Da-aaaa?”

He snapped his head up toward the end of the aisle where wee Brianna’s face was craned around Claire’s elbow from her seat in the rolling cart. Despite the sadness still hanging like fog over his heart, Jamie couldn’t help but snort with laughter at the sight: the tiny blue bow on a clasp that Claire used to hold back the lass’s curls from her face was now dangling from the very tip of her forelock, bobbing jauntily against her jaw.

“Daaaaaa?” Brianna wailed again, urging him to haste. The word transformed into a squawk as Claire pushed the handcart around the corner and caused them to disappear from view.

Jamie walked hastily forward, placing a hand lightly on the brim of his grey hat to keep it slipping off, shoes squeaking on the gleaming floor as he hurried toward the sounds of Bree’s calling for him, and Claire’s, “Oh for heaven’s sake, Bree, hush, he’s right behind us!” Brianna did not quiet even remotely until Jamie had reappeared, despite Claire’s best efforts. “Jesus H. Christ, I am so very ready for this phase of separation anxiety to run its course,” his wife said under her breath.

Jamie stooped to reaffix Brianna’s bow (Ms. Byrd called it a Barrette). “There you are, a chuisle.
That’s better, aye?”

Brianna misinterpreted his bending down as an intention to lift her out of the seat. When he failed to meet this expectation, she glared and made insistent noises at him, raising her hands up to him.

He gave her a steely eye and a raised brow. “Use words, Brianna. What would you like?”

She changed her tack at once, beaming angelically up at him. “Up-Da-peas?”

“Much better,” he said gently, lifting his daughter up into his arms. On impulse he tossed her up high over his head and caught her again.

For a moment, he thought she was going to start crying; her eyes had widened and she looked completely stunned from the suddenness of the motion. Then, she cackled uproariously and demanded, “Um’gin!!”

He obliged, giving two or three more tosses before nestling her back down under his chin and kissing her head. He stood swaying for a minute before noticing the strange looks he was receiving with nearly all the other shopgoers in view. One woman, who was standing a mere ten feet away, was actually glaring at him.

Months or even weeks before, he might have reddened and gone quiet, not wishing to attract further attention. Instead, he met the woman’s eyes with a graceful nod and said boldly, “May I be of some assistance to ye, madame?”

The woman gave a great huff, a scandalized, “Really!” and turned her back.

Claire was doing her best to keep from laughing, hiding her face in the cart as she set two loaves of bread within.

Jamie gave a weary kind of noise. “I dinna have manure on my nose, do Sassenach?”

She gave a small sigh herself as she straightened up. “I think the usual supermarket biddies aren’t used to seeing fathers here…least of all a father being openly affectionate to his daughter.”

Jamie snorted derisively. “They’d rather I shouted at her? Or pretended she wasna there?”

“Who bloody knows? I’m not often here myself, to be honest, God-Bless-Penelope-Byrd.”

“God-Bless-Penelope-Byrd, indeed,” he agreed, kissing Bree again and smiling sweetly at the judgmental passersby. ‘Twas better than giving them a swift kick in the arses, nasty wee besoms.

Together, while Claire gathered her selections, Jamie and Bree walked around the cases of fruits and vegetables, as ordered and gleaming as jewel-bright honeycombs. Given that Brianna was of the age where she gave the name of everything in sight (often ad nauseum), he pointed at the pile of potatoes Claire was sorting through. “D’ye ken what this is, a leannan?”

“Tay-toe!” came the prompt answer.

“Aye, po-tato, verra good. And in the Gaelic,” he said, switching to that language, “’tis buntàta. Can ye say that, wee love?”

“Mmm-ta-duh!”

“Buntàta”
“Bmm-ta-rra!”

“Buntàta”

“It’s-call-the-whole-thing-off” Claire sang—yes, sang! “Oh, never you mind,” she laughed when she saw his face, she carrying blithely on selecting onions and leeks as if it were perfectly natural to break into song with no explanation.

As it turned out, Brianna proved to be as helpful to Jamie as he was to her when it came to naming the produce before them. For all his travel, education, and general knowledge of the world, he genuinely did not know the answer when he pointed at a huge, green-striped thing and asked. “And what is this, a chuisle?

“Warrr-men-in!” she squealed, lurching forward in his arms to reach for it.

“No, cub, we dinna need that,” he said, pulling her away. Christ, the thing seemed large and heavy enough to crush her! “Is that right, Sassenach? Warmennin?”

“Watermelon,” she corrected, smiling fondly. “They’re sweet and very juicy—perfect in summer!” She selected one and plunked it into the cart.

“Ye dinna need to buy one for my sake, Claire. I was just curi—”

“And why ever not?” she said, with a shrug and a twinkle of the eye, adjusting her handbag and giving his arm a playful tweak. “Live a little, why don’t you!”

“D’ye hear that, Bree?” Jamie said, shifting her up closer to his mouth so he could whisper all confidential-like: “Mama says we can have all the sweeties we desire!”

Brianna raised both hands and gave a cheer. Claire raised both eyebrows and gave a splutter of laughter. “Why you absolute scoundrel! I said no such thing!”

“But as we’re ‘living a little,’ mo nighean donn, I think we’d all feel more alive wi’ a wee bit of chocolate, aye?”

(The chocolate cake made an excellent final course to their rather eclectic backyard meal of Cock-a-leeky soup; crusty bread, purchased and then warmed in the oven with butter and garlic; two exceptional wines that Jamie agonized in choosing from the available multitude; for Bree, some alarmingly-green wriggly stuff called Jello; ....and Watermelon, all washed down with Coca-Cola).
Some Sunday Morning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

September, 1950

Some Sunday morning is goin’ to be

Some Sunday morning for someone and me!

Bells will be chiming an old melody,

‘Specially for someone and me!

“I truly dinna understand it Claire,” Jamie said, shaking his head at me.

“What?”

“I canna remember ye ever being musically inclined, back in the days before, but seems every moment I turn around, now, you’re fair bursting out into song!”

“What can I say, darling?” I sighed dramatically, batting my lashes. “You put a song in my heart!”

Our eyes met and we both burst into gales of laughter at the sickly-sweet endearment.

Sickly-sweet….but accurate, I thought, my heart feeling light.

We turned the corner onto Burnham Avenue, pushing Bree before us in her pram. It was a little chilly for a September morning, and there was a whiff of winter in the air; not enough to keep us from our usual Sunday walk before mass, but enough that Jamie kept his arm around me as we walked, and I snuggled happily into his shoulder.

“Summ-summy-morneeen,” sang Bree.

“Oh, so she’s a wee songster, as well!” Jamie said, amused, peering down at her. “I’m to be overrun by you tuneful lot, then!”

“I think I picked it up from Uncle Lamb,” I mused. “He used to sing under his breath as he dug or wrote. Used to drive me bananas, in fact,” I said, laughing. “I’ll do my best to cut it out, I promise!”

“No, no,” Jamie replied hastily, grinning. “It’s charming, Sassenach, truly. I only wish I could join along wi’ y~”

Jamie stopped dead, staring ahead as I was… at the swarm of police cars at the end of the street.

“God, it’s… just terrible,” I said for perhaps the dozenth time. I could see the reflection of my hands shaking as I finished pinning up my hair in the mirror.

Approaching the melée of flashing lights and sirens, hearts pounding, we had joined the small huddle of concerned neighbors, hearing the story that trickled back in low whispers.
The Nortons. That was their name. We had never known that, just recognized them from occasionally crossing paths at the park or market: a husband, wife, and three small children, all with white-blonde hair, such that Jamie had always referred to them fondly in passing as ‘the ducklings.’ The father was a banker, someone said. The mother was often to be seen in her yard tending flowers. Nice people. Normal people.

An armed man had broken into the family’s house in the night, threatened them, then beat and bound the parents before locking all five of them in a windowless closet. The vandal then stripped the house of its valuables and made off into the night. It was nearly eight hours later that a paperboy happened to hear the children’s cries and the family was rescued. No lasting injuries sustained, thank God, but all five severely and understandably terrified by the ordeal of the night.

“Terrible,” I said again, shuddering at the memory of the five blanked-wrapped figures clinging close together in their front yard.

As I finished affixing my hat, Jamie walked down the hall to join me in the foyer. He had said nothing the entire walk back to the house. He’d remained silent as we’d washed and dressed and gotten Bree ready, preparing for the service.

“We’d best get on our way, I suppose,” I said, less than enthusiastically checking my wristwatch and scooping Bree off the living room rug. “Only fifteen minutes to mass.”

“I’m no’ going to mass this morning,” he said with almost no inflection.

“Oh, good,” I said, relieved, though a bit miffed that he hadn’t said so before I’d made a to-do of getting myself and Bree dressed and coiffed. “I’m not much in the mood eith–wh–?…Jamie, where are you going?” For he had taken up his hat and overcoat and was putting them on, clearly meaning to go out.

He didn’t look up. “To buy a weapon.”

Taken aback by this blunt answer as I was, I supposed it was only natural given what we’d just seen. He’d slept with a dirk under his pillow for the first three years of our marriage, had he not? I shifted Bree in my arms, letting her play with my hair. “I’m not sure there will be many stores open on a Sunday morning where you can buy a decent knife. You may want to wait until—”

“No’ a knife, Sassenach. I’m going to buy a pistol.”

“Like hell you are.”

He stared at me, for a moment perfectly blank with surprise. I stared right back, one eyebrow raised in defiance. He was actually speechless. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. I heaved a sigh, half-laughing. “God, men and their love of toys.”

“Toy-toysies-toys!” came a far more cheerful voice at my ear. I knelt to set Bree down on the living room floor, opening the basket that held a small selection of toys and books. She set to her work, happily finding George the Rabbit and her favorite wooden blocks.

Jamie was still standing in the foyer, I could see from the corner of my eye, giving me a patient look as he explained, “It’s to keep in the house, Sassenach, the pistol. I dinna mean to carry it about wi’ me.”

“Even so,” I said, rising and facing him with my arms crossed. “Absolutely not.”
Jamie’s face hardened and reddened now. “After learning what we did this morning…? How could you possibly not wish to see us better protected, Claire?”

“The burglar didn’t discharge his weapon, Jamie. He didn’t shoot at the family. He just had a gun.”

“Ye think every scoundrel will be satisfied wi’ that? The Nortons were lucky, that’s all. We willna be caught empty-handed like they were.”

“Jamie, darling,” I said through slightly gritted teeth, “this is a different time.”

Jamie made an angry sound in his throat, gesturing sharply. “But there’s still evil in the world, no? I read the newspapers, Claire—I ken fine that there are as many sick bastards now as in 1743, if none so recognizable at first sight. So dinna give me that tripe that there’s no danger to be had in 1950.”

“Yes, but this isn’t the bloody Highlands, either,” I snapped, picking up my coat and purse and brushing past him, feeling the alarming heat of true discord boiling between us for the first time in recent memory, and wanting to blink my eyes and have all melt away.

“And what’s that meant to signify?” came the sharp question from behind me.

“This is an advanced civil society the like of which no one of your century could have even dreamed,” I said crisply, opening the door to the closet at the end of the hall. “There’s rule of law that keeps your ‘sick bastards’ from extorting and murdering people with impunity.”

“Oh, aye? So it’s all well and good if Claire Fraser is shot and killed, because the perpetrator will go to prison for it in the end, is that it?”

“AND—” I ignored this jab out of hand. I was angry and getting angrier, but I was slow and fussy with hanging my things, not ready to turn and face him as I barreled forward. “—the other side of that ordered society is that even if Jamie Fraser thinks it’s merited, he can’t just shoot someone at the slightest provocation!”

“I dinna intend to shoot at any provocation….” He was straining to keep calm, but I could clearly hear the danger rising between his clenched teeth. “…except that someone enters this house to do violence against my family.”

I turned on my heel and gave him a look of steel. “Jamie, I won’t have a gun in this house. They’re dangerous and unnecessary.”

“Unnecessary?” He was almost six feet away, but even at that safe distance, his own look could have sliced me in two. I jumped back in reflex as he snarled, “You would rather be shot–rather *our daughter* or the next bairn be killed before our eyes– than have me keep a weapon under our roof? Is that what you’re telling me?”

I threw up my hands in abject frustration and panic. “Jamie, that isn’t bloody fair!”

“How? HOW is what I’m saying unreasonable, Claire?” He was shaking with rage. “DAMN YOU, Claire, TELL ME!”

“What if Bree got hold of your bloody pistol without you knowing and thought it a toy and pulled the trigger?? She could—”

He was seething, deep scarlet, moments from complete eruption. “Ye think—I’d be—so careless—as to—”
“Accidents, Jamie!” I said, throwing up my hands and bustling into the bedroom to escape that look. “Accidents happen! Don’t you ever see that in your newspapers? And it’s not just Bree I’m worried about—YOU could shoot someone out of your bloodminded warrior instinct and be put away for life to rot in some prison cell, and THEN where would we fucking be??”

His voice was low and lethal from the doorway, barely a whisper. “In all the years you’ve known me… in ALL the dangers we’ve faced… have you ever known me to act rashly in danger? EVER?” he hissed. “Have I ever struck or killed by accident?

“Jamie that’s beside the—” I turned, pleading, and suddenly he was only inches from me, his breath hot on my face. “Dar—Darling, listen, you have to trust m—”

“NO!” he bellowed, leaning down so close to me that I tried to step back but was trapped by the wall, trapped by those blue eyes blazing. “No, Claire, I DO NOT have to trust you on this. What ye choose to wear, what profession you pursue: concerning those I have chosen trust you, no matter how much they might gall me—but I will not TRUST you and Bree to the CHANCE that invaders will be merciful or stupid! Do ye hear me?”

“Jamie, I—”

“I will NOT live knowing myself to be at a disadvantage to those that would attempt to harm my family. And the fact that you would leave ME to be shot first wi’ only a knife in my hand—That your—your—PRINCIPLES are more important than—”

“…Da?”

We both snapped our heads to the bedroom door, where Bree stood clutching George, eyes overflowing with tears, her sweet face a mask of horror.

Jamie made a sound….a pitiful sound…shame and despair….and turned away from us both, retreating to the space between the bed and wall.

I went at once to Bree and swept her up into my arms, patting and soothing. “It’s alright, baby, hush, now, everything’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine…but God, he was right.

It wasn’t my ‘principles,’ thought. As much as I did think it dangerous to allow the easy purchase of guns generally, that wasn’t the reason I didn’t want one in our house.

It was that I was afraid of being afraid again. I didn’t want to live once more in a world where people sought to attack, maim, rape, and destroy me and those I held dear. Knowing evil exists in the world is one thing; acknowledging that such dangers might find me, my loved ones—that was what had pierced me with terror; as if arming against danger would call it forth.

…which was utterly foolish, I realized as soon as the thought crossed my mind. The English deserters in that long-ago glade after our first wedding had not attacked me because I carried a sgian dubh—the having of it had simply allowed me to do what needed to be done to defend myself…and Jamie.

His face was averted, hung between his shoulders as he leaned with both hands against the wall; but I could see his shoulders shaking, and hear the desperate effort to which he went to suppress (almost suppress) bitter sobs.

I came close behind him, slowly, Bree sniffling and gasping on my shoulder as her own tears failed to subside. I laid a hand softly on his arm and said firmly, but I hoped not coldly, “If we must have
“It…we’ll keep it locked in the bedside drawer.”

“Thank you,” he said softly. Then after a long silence he turned fast and crushed us to him. “I’m sorry….sorry, Claire….I didna mean… I ken ye dinna want this…but…”

I crushed him right back, or as best I could with only one free arm.

No, I didn’t want this, but he was right: never once had I seen him err in battle or hand-to-hand combat. In decisions? In words? God, yes; too many times to count. But In blows? When lives were on the line? Never. There was no one on earth I trusted more than him, not just in some romantic, theoretical way; but also in the capability of his mind and body to act with decision and incision.

I hated this…but I was choosing to trust him.

“I’m sorry, Sassenach. And you, a leannan,” he said to Bree, “Da is verra sorry he frightened ye.”

He spoke gently in Gaelic to her— I love you, sweetheart—and kissed her cheek, wrapping his arms around us both again and exhaling heavily.

“Claire, I—” he said, haltingly, and I could hear the pain in it; the regret. “I ken there’s no valor in this. It’s fear that screams at me to insist upon this thing, rather than submit and trust that all will be well. It’s just that…” His mouth went dry and he had to swallow. “I’ve nothing in the world save you two.”

“You think I have?” I choked out, his fear seemed to creep across the space between our feet and snake up my leg into my heart.

He pressed his cheek hard into the top of my head. “I pray wi’ all my soul, Claire… that we never once have to unlock the drawer.”

Chapter End Notes

I know this was a bit of a departure from the normal fluffy scenarios, and I knew when writing it that it was a risk to show Jamie in a way that many people ( *myself included*) would not approve of! I treated this as an opportunity to challenge myself to have Jamie remain true to his character in a fraught setting. Hopefully, even if their choices are not to your personal liking, you can understand why Jamie and Claire acted the way they did.
“Oh, yes, I’m sure Cinderella is a darling film,” I said into the receiver, curling my finger absently around the cord, feeling the breeze tickling the backs of my knees, “but I’d really prefer not to have Bree go to the movies until she’s a bit older…. Glad you understand, thank you, Penelope, dear….and thank you for answering my call….No, no word yet, still waiting…. Hope to hear very shortly!….I’ll phone again as soon as we know…Yes, goodbye, dear.”

I hung up and and walked back to my shady bench from the pay phone, checking my wristwatch for what felt like the thousandth time that morning. Jamie and I had both taken off work for today’s mission, but at this rate—three bloody hours after we’ve arrived at the godforsaken DMV—I apparently needn’t have bothered.

“Come on, Jamie,” I murmured under my breath in the direction of the glass doors across the green, “give him what for.”

He’d failed the first time, two weeks ago. A travesty, too, for t hanks to his quick memory and ease with academic learning, he’d gotten a perfect score on the written portion—a first for this district, the glowing proctor had said. His only mistake was to have the miserable poor luck to be assigned the most crotchety pedant known to mankind for the in-car examination. Jamie neglected to signal a left-hand turn once—ONCE—and the nasty gremlin had failed him on the spot. To make matters worse, the old grump had rambled on and on about it, tsking about ‘a man of Jamie’s age ought to know better,’ ‘Such carelessness!’ ‘A danger to himself and others!’ and perhaps most gallingly, ‘Drated foreigners coming in and roaming about as they please, bringing in their Commie ideas!’ et cetera.

“It’s alright, Sassenach, I’ll ken next time to be more fastidious wi’ the signals. It’s *no’* matter, *a nighean,*” he’d said firmly, trying to calm down my ragings against the examiner, his relatives, and any animals unfortunate enough to be his pets. “I’ll almost certainly be assigned a different examiner next time, dinna fash.”

But given the many hours he’d put into studying traffic laws and practicing on the road with Hank, the failure definitely rankled him, and I knew it.

None daunted, we’d tried again today. Jamie had come out after his written exam and seemed confident in his performance, laughing easily with me as we shared a coffee and a Mallo Cup (his favorite modern treat to date), apparently ready to take on the world. Then, Lo and Be-bloody-hold, out had rung an oily, “James Fraser?”: the Gremlin, clipboard in hand, grinning with the macabre glee of an executioner. Jamie had swallowed his mouthful, kissed my cheek, and stridden forward to meet his foe with dark determination, Penelope’s keys clinking in his hand.

After the first hour of (im)patiently waiting, I’d gone outside to get away from the general stink of the Department of Motor Vehicles. My bookmark lay scarcely twenty pages into 1984, and I couldn’t have told a bloody thing about those twenty if my life depended on it.

Another half-hour later, my nerves worn to shreds, I looked up at the opening double-doors for the millionth time to—at last!—see Jamie emerging, buttoning his suit jacket as he walked toward me. He saw me, I could tell, but he wasn’t meeting my eye, staying hidden under his hat, hands uncharacteristically shoved in his pockets.
“Bollocks,” I hissed under my breath, rising from the bench under the tree, “Goddamn frigging bollocks….THAT EXECRABLE WRETCH!” I preemptively shouted as he walked up, head still bowed, reaching for my hand and kissing it soberly.

“Sassenach, hush, ye—”

“You wait right here, I’m going to give that little xenophobic vermin a piece of my–”

“Sassenach,” Jamie said, voice steady and light, “will ye stop blethering and look down?”

I spluttered for a moment, but did look down… to see a crisp Massachusetts driver’s license in my hand.

I swatted him with it. “So it’s YOU that’s the execrable wretch!” I scolded, laughing, in thoroughly relieved pique. Abandoning décorum, I jumped up and flung both arms around his neck, kissing his cheek exuberantly “Jamie, you DID pass—Congratulations, you utter ARSE!”

“Aye,” he laughed.“The sour wee mannie tried to dock me again for my four-way stop,” Jamie recounted, kissing my neck happily, “but I recited book-chapter-and-verse from the manual and proved that I did in fact have the right of way. He was fuming all the way back about how all Europeans are a threat to ‘Our Liberty’ but…he passed me.”

“Oh, well DONE, darling!” I cried, inspecting the license again as he set me back down. I then stepped back to fix him with a gimlet eye. “SO…are you ready to have this out once and for all, then?”

He gave me the look right back, with interest. “Have you come to your senses since last night?”

“My senses are right as rain; but I shan’t be swayed, if that’s what you mean.”

“Shall we flip a coin for it, then?”

“My coin,” I agreed, withdrawing one from my handbag and giving it to him, “you flip, I call….TAILS!” I cried as Jamie caught the coin and slapped it onto the back of his hand.

“Tis the moment of truth, Claire: give up now and walk away wi’ honor?”

“Never! Tails, you brute.”

Jamie unveiled the coin dramatically….then groaned.

“Ha-HAAA!” I crowed, “the ‘49, light-blue, four-door sedan it is!!! So there!”

“But the station wagon is so much more practical, Sassenach!” he insisted for the dozenth time.

“We’ve made do without a car entirely to this point—I think we’ll manage. And before you ask, yes I’m dead-set on the blue. We’ve got quite enough red in our family as it is, thank you very much.”

He gave a dramatic sigh, but the corner of his mouth was twitching. “Fine, fair’s fair. But—” he held out his elbow to me in a courtly fashion, “—only if the lady will share a milkshake wi’ me before we give Mr. Ford our custom.”

I took the arm with equal grace. “That sounds perfectly reasonable. As long as it’s a chocolate milkshake, no malt.”

He snorted. “Is there any other kind?”
“Good chap!”
Later that same afternoon

September, 1950

“Daddy!!!”

I parked Penelope’s car at the curb in front of the house, and got out quickly to see Bree pelting down the front stairs toward Jamie, who had stepped out of the ‘49 Ford he’d pulled carefully into the driveway. He’d been doubling back to come greet me, but hearing his daughter’s squeals, he turned and crouched down in the grass for interception.

Bree, however, was far more excited about the new car. Instead of flinging herself into Jamie’s arms, she made a sharp left and thudded herself into the front passenger door with both hands. Liking the sound immensely, she began pummeling the door further, jumping up and down and shrieking with giggles as she did so.

“No-no-no, a nighean,” Jamie said sharply as he reached her and grabbed both her hands away.

Bree jumped, startled and horrified by his harsh tone. Jamie was so unfailingly gentle with her, always, that for a moment, I thought she was going to burst out into tears. Jamie realized this, too, and quickly released her hands, laying one of his own against the gleaming paint of the car door. “Now, wee Bree, ye mustna hit our Bonnie. Ye wouldna wish to hurt her feelings by thrashing her about, aye?”

“Bonnie?” I laughed, incredulous as I came to stand with Mrs. Byrd, “Is that its name??”

“Tis her name,” Jamie said with dignity, though I could see the corner of his mouth twitching. To Bree, he encouraged, “Can ye say ‘hello’ to Bonnie Blue?”

Without missing a beat, Bree took a step back and waved at the car. “Hiiii-lo, Bobbie bloo!”

We all laughed and Jamie kissed her cheek. “Aye, that’s right, cub. We all must be verra gentle and sweet to Miss Bonnie so she lasts a good long while.”

Bree looked pensive for a moment, considering, then walked forward to lay an unutterably delicate kiss on the driver’s door.

“‘Inna laff-me!” she scolded as we all did. She pointed a stern finger at Jamie, then the car. “M’kissie, Da.”

Jamie opened his mouth to decline, then removed his hat and laid a soft kiss on the handle. “How’s that, cub?” he asked Bree with a grin.

“‘S’okay,” she said with a curt nod, rising on tiptoes to peer in the side mirror.

Jamie laughed, standing, “She’ll keep a man verra humble, one day, that one.”

Jamie was like a bronze statue behind the wheel, impeccable and sure in his movement. It was the deliberateness, the same steeled concentration in his eye that he’d used in battle. At the wheel, he used it to be cautious, careful, erring on the side of slowness for the sake of accuracy. Still, while we
were puttering along at about the same speed as an octogenarian on foot, the set of his jaw made him look so…

“Damn me, but you do look *sexy* doing that, Jamie.”

“Oh, aye?” he said, not taking his eye from the road, but the corners of his mouth crooked downward: a suppressed smile.

“Indeed, you do,” I confirmed matter-of-factly, scooting closer to him on the wide seat and reaching out a delicate finger to trace his arm. “Positively *rakish*.”

“More so than when I’m about other activities?”

“Oh, in terms of sexiness, this is ranking in your top five activities, to be sure,” I said, with mock solemnity.

He snorted. “Not that I’m no’ sensible of the compliment, but I canna quite see how turning a steering wheel should be at all rousing to ye.”

“Well….” I kept my face intentionally composed, tracing the tendons of his right hand, feeling the strength in them as they grasped the self-same wheel. “Do you…happen to know what the kids do, when they ‘go for a drive’?”

“Other than getting to their intended destination, ye mean?”

“The *destination* is everything,” I said dramatically, walking my fingers up his arm. “They find a secluded spot to park the car….” I leaned forward and breathed in his ear, “…and then set about to…. not enjoy the scenery.”

He shivered at my touch and his fingers tightened a bit on the steering wheel but he didn’t seem in the least bit shocked. “Aye, seems reasonable, there being fewer cow byres and springhouses to which the youngsters might secrete themselves.”

“Oh-ho! And just who was young Jamie Fraser *securing* with in cow byres, might I ask?”

“And I might just as easily inquire *with whom it was that ye *didn*’t enjoy the scenery, Sassenach…*” he said sardonically.

“Oh, *really!*” I swatted him, making him laugh and playfully swat me back. “Teenagers didn’t *have* cars when I was at the cavorting age, you oaf! *Movies,*” I drawled, seeing his puzzlement. “Lovers’ Lanes are common spots for young people to—” *Ahah, how to explain this one?* “—get murdered in gory films.”

“Jesus CHRIST, Sassenach,” Jamie said in alarm, taking his eye from the road a moment to give me a look of deep revulsion. “Folk *enjoy* seeing young couples getting—killed?”

“They’re not *all* about people getting—Oh never mind, I *will* get you to the cinema eventually, but anyway, I also happen to know more about driving dates than I’d wish because I have the *joy* of being a compulsory member of the debriefing committee for Della O’ Malley’s courting escapades.”

“Ah, our wee Della,” Jamie sighed ruefully, turning right. “She must get herself marrit, soon, or she’ll end up so entangled she’ll need to be *pruned,*” he laughed. “So…whereabouts is the ‘Lovers’ Lane’ in these parts, then?”

“Oh, there are many, I’m sure. But Della’s favorite was in a huge copse of willow trees near the big
creek off of Plymouth Tra—"

And before my eyes, not two seconds later, the car rattled merrily onto none other… than Plymouth Trace.

“What was it ye were saying, Sassenach?”

“Why, you presumptuous wee bastard! How the bloody hell did you know?”

The wee bastard in question grinned devilishly, chancing a glance away from the road. “The lads at Fernacre as about as eager to crow about their escapades as Miss O’Malley. I figured it would be fitting to take our Bonnie here on her first trip.”

“You talk bout her like she’s our child,” I giggled.

“Dinna listen to her, Bonnie,” Jamie crooned, patting her (“HER!” pah!) fondly on the dashboard. “You’re part o’ the family now.”

We pulled into the arbor, carefully, slowly and came to rest between two of the trees that stood close together. I couldn’t help gasping as I opened the door and tripped out between the fluttering curtains of yellow-green. There were perhaps twenty willows, scattered around a lazy bend in a wide, sweet creek; tall ones, with their fronds waving gracefully in the late-afternoon breezes.

Della liked this spot, I knew, for the seclusion it provided in the dark of the evening. In the afternoon, with sunlight dappling between the leaves, though, it was—

“Breathtaking…”

“My thoughts exactly,” came a soft, low voice at my shoulder as his arm came around my waist.

“Flatterer,” I grinned.

“No,” he whispered, pressing me back against the side rear of car, his eyes dark with feeling.

I melted into him, reaching hungrily for his mouth as he reached for mine. I could feel the sun-warmed panels hot through my skirt as he pressed me into them, his mouth, his hands, his entire body insistent against mine.

I could feel my body rising to his, my blood pounding furiously in every vessel, crying out to him. Jamie. My Jamie.

“Does it ever stop?” I panted, “the wanting you?”

“No,” he whispered with a soft laugh before taking my mouth again. “Never.”

A long, fevered string of moments later, Jamie’s hand left my neck (though the other continued to roam freely. A moment later I heard the springing CLONK of the rear door latch releasing. “Get inside,” he whispered hoarsely. “I’ve got to have you now.”

“In the…? I thought we were supposed to ‘be gentle to Bonnie.’”

“Oh, aye, wi’ Bonnie I’ll be gentle…. Wi’ you—” He latched his mouth into the crease of my neck and chuckled darkly as I groaned with the rush of sensation. “Now… get inside.”

I had his trousers down around his ankles in a jiffy, leaving him exposed. “Kick off your shoes,” I
whispered urgently. He tried but got tangled up, and had to bend down to extricate himself. I took the opportunity to spread our picnic blanket over the back seat and clamber in.

Jamie joined me a minute later, bare-arsed, pulling the door shut behind him. He knelt before me on the floor, running his hands up under the skirt of my dress. He was smiling, but I could tell he was done with kidding around.

“You’re wearing far too many clothes, mo nighean donn,” he whispered, nuzzling my thighs, “far too many.”

While my vision was obscured by my dress flying up over my head, he set to work between my legs, eliciting a moan that surely shook the vines surrounding us. “Oh… Jamie….”

I heard—no, felt—him laugh against me, not slowing his pace one bit. It seemed hardly moments before I cried, “Ja—Jamie—I’m going—to—”

And I did, my vision going lilac with energy as I melted under his touch.

He didn’t wait long. With remarkable economy of motion, he pulled me down against him and whirled us around so that I was sitting astride him on the seat. My head almost brushed the roof but that hardly mattered. I was dizzy, spinning as I was curling my entire body around him, bending my head to him, needing more even as I throbbed.

We slid together with a sigh that seemed to emit from us both. I could feel the car rocking softly back and forth with us as I rode him, hard and desperately.

“Sassenach….” he moaned, his head pressed hard into my shoulder as he gripped my hips so hard I knew I would bruise and moved me harder, deeper, faster. One hand slid further down and used his thumb to bring me to the brink again and we were crying out together, pulsing against each other to get one more moment, one more bolt of our common magic.

When we were both spent, he let his head fall back and I slumped against him, wrapping my arms slowly around his neck, both of us one sweaty, quivering heap. The sun beamed through the rear window, bathing our still-one flesh in blissful warmth and light. I took the opportunity to study him while his eyes were closed. His hair was short and arranged, and his clothes, wherever they were, were different, but he was still the lad—the achingly sweet, caring lad—who had slept outside my door to keep away brigands in the night. So pure and loving… so… exquisite. The lines of his face; the hollows of cheek and temple; the smile that tugged at his lips even as he heaved with exhaustion. Glowing in the sunlight, he looked so beautiful, I truly wanted to cry.

I opened my mouth to tell him so, but just at that moment, he spoke. “There’s a good lass.”

I thought he was addressing me, so it came as quite a surprise then he thumped not my bare arse but the seat beside us. “If this be the time we conceive, we’ll keep ye in mind when we name the bairn.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I murmured against his mouth, barely managing it, widely as I was grinning.

“Aye,” he laughed, a little sheepishly, wrapping his arms snugly around my hips. “I’ll try to be more dignif—”

I stopped his ridiculous mouth with another kiss.
October, 1950

“Thanks for doing this, bud,” Tom said, pulling his coat off the hook by the lounge door and shrugging into it. “Really. I owe you big time. Honestly, I’d cover it myself, but I’ve had this special night out planned with Marian, and—”

“Dinna mention it, Tom,” Jamie said, gesturing reassurance. “Truly, I’m happy to be of help.”

Tom rummaged in his pockets for his keys, still looking regretful. “Was Claire spitting mad at me for stealing you away for the night?”

“No, no, not at all. On the phone just now, she bade me wish Nelson the best o’ luck wi’ his recovery. The gri—” Careful, man, “—that is, the Flu is a nasty business, and I’ve reason to know it.”

“Well, you’re a saint for stepping in last minute to cover his night watch shift, J—really really appreciate it.” Tom said once more as they walked out into the car yard.

It was approaching sunset, and the last of the horses were being led to the stables for the night. It would be a peaceful night, if a long one, Jamie hoped.

Tom opened the door of his 1946 Chevrolet Pickup (black, with silver trimmings and the special wide-base wheels) and sat behind the wheel, looking up at Jamie as he cranked the engine. “Jerry will be in at five in the morning as usual—Don’t you even think of staying to work tomorrow though, hear?”

“I hear. Have a good night, Tom. And give Marian my best, aye?” He slammed the door and waved Tom off on his way.

It was a peaceful evening, on the whole. He saw the last of the day staff off to their homes and made the rounds as night fell, changing water, food, and blankets and taking special care to inspect several of the beasts that hadn’t been given proper attention of late.

He loved being among the horses—always had, ever since he was a wee lad. The quiet strength of them, he supposed it was—the knowledge that they were large and strong enough to kill a man, but kind and soulful nonetheless. He loved speaking to them in Gaelic. He got a few odd looks for it during the day, to be sure, but other than Brianna, who understood and could speak a few words, the horses were the only folk in this new life to whom he could speak in his heart’s tongue, and feel as if he were fully understood. Claire, of course, knew his heart, regardless of the language; but speaking
soft words to the horses, they seemed to have a knowing in their large, round eyes that transcended time and its changings. Aye, they seemed to say, you’re of long-ago stuff, man; and so am I.

“Or maybe you’re just a horse, aye, Val?” he said, rubbing the beast affectionately on the nose before closing the stall and heading back to the lounge.

He was dismayed to find it was only half-past ten, for the length of the day had caught up with him. He rubbed his eyes but couldn’t seem to shake their bleary view. If only he had a book with him— Just yesterday, he had gotten from the Library a tome on American government, and he’d been itching to read it and figure out this country once and for all.

He tried to make do with jotting notes in his wee book on the happenings reported by the man on the Wireless about the war in distant Korea. Though it pleased him that he was able to understand most of it, the news of the fighting chilled him, and he couldn’t make himself mind it for long.

Before heading back out into the chill to make another circuit of the stalls, he set about making coffee in the wee machine, now feeling weary in more ways than one. As willing as he’d been to come to poor Nelson’s aid, he would’ve given most anything to fall into a soft bed with Claire at that very moment.

As he was adding a dollop of whiskey from the cupboard above the Frigidaire, there came a small knock and a soft, musical, “Hellooo-ooo?” from behind him.

To his immense surprise, Claire was standing there, wearing blue jeans, boots, and wool coat against the crisp chill of early October; In her arms, Bree, pajama-clad, covered over with a warm sweater and a knitted cap.

“Well, if this isna a pleasant surprise!” He said, hastily setting down the bottle and going to them. “I was just thinking of how I wanted to see my loves.”

“Horzzis, Mama?” piped Bree against his ear as he pulled them both close.

“Christ, but it’s late, mo nighean donn. Is everything alright? And how did ye get—?”

“Everything’s fine, we just couldn’t sleep; took a taxi,” Claire explained her voice sounding small and tired. She laid her head on his shoulder as they swayed. “Hope it doesn’t disturb you, we just— needed to see you.”

He squeezed them both tighter, kissed Claire’s cool cheek, and stepped back, feeling warmed to his core as he took Bree happily into his arms. “I’ll never say no to my lassies, no matter the hour.”

“Da-me-in-go–” Bree gasped out, brimming with excitement. “Da-n-go mitta-seeinn-th-horzzis, m’okay, Da-ddy? M’okay?”

He laughed and sputtered a bit as he took in the rapid fire. Brianna, little more than a month away from two years of age, had been making leaps and bounds in terms of her vocabulary of late, beginning to get the way of longer, more complicated sentences. Increasingly consistent in this endeavor she undoubtedly was, but it always took that extra second for Jamie to mentally translate the stream of almost-correct syllables, a delay that invariably peeved the speaker, who never could understand why folk were being so slow.

“Horzzis, m’okay?” she repeated.

“Seeing Da and seeing the horses were on an equal footing, as far as Bree was concerned,” Claire said, smiling, but still sounding tired. “She’s never seen a horse in person, before.”
“Horzza-horzzis!” Bree insisted again, craning around for sight of one, then squaring back up to look him sternly, her hands on his cheeks. “Seein-th-horzzis–m’okay, Daddy?”

“Okay, a leannan,” he grinned, squeezing her tight and kissing her wee nose. Christ, but he loved this feisty wee baggage. “Let’s go see the horses.”

“What have you been doing to pass the time?” Claire asked as they entered Stable B.

“Oh, coffee, the Radio, thinking, talking wi’ the horses.”

“Do they make good conversation?”

“Oh, well enough,” he said, clucking his tongue to beckon Cornflower to the stall door.

Bree gasped at sight of the huge, grey flanks rotating in the stall. “Issa horz–AGHHH!!”

She squawked as Cornflower’s head came around and jumped so violently Jamie nearly lost his grip. “Och, come now, lass, it’s only one o’ the horses ye wanted to see, aye?” He took a step closer and turned so she could see Cornflower over his shoulder.

“Noooo!” Bree squealed, terrified, cowering under Jamie’s chin. “‘Inna like-’im!”

“Nothing to be scairt of, mo chridhe.” He reached out a hand and firmly stroked Corny’s soft nose. “See? She’s gentle—just like a big dog.”

“Notta dog!” Bree wailed sharply as she tried to get as far as possible from the beast, almost sobbing. “Ssa horssiz!”

No matter how much they coaxed and wheedled, Brianna could not be persuaded to touch Cornflower or any of the other horses. She would show interest in them from a distance, but when confronted by their huge toothy faces, she would wail and burrow—terrified—into Jamie’s chest.

They walked amongst the stalls, talking contentedly of Jamie’s day at Fernacre, Claire’s day at the hospital, and so on. Claire still seemed quieter than usual. Just as Jamie was about to put Bree down so that he might hold Claire close and ask what was amiss, Bree suddenly lurched her body toward the opening of the next stall and whispered. “Daddy! Is–horzzis is–’im sleepin’?”

“Oh, aye,” he said, encouraged by her interest, “that’s wee Valkyrie. And aye, she’s taking a nap. Here,” he said, opening the door and stepping gingerly inside, “shall we bid her hello?”

“No-oooo!” Bree began to squeal as they approached the horse, twisting in his arms to get away.

“Whisht, whisht, be still, a chuisle, there’s naught to be afraid of.” Holding Bree tight—the lass would have to get accustomed to horses, and that’s all there was about it—he knelt down next to the jet-black mare, reaching out a hand to gently rub her neck.

Val, who was evidently only dozing, whuffed in acknowledgement, and Bree actually giggled at the resultant spray of wind and spittle. She then froze and looked up at Jamie, thoroughly stricken, evidently taken aback by her own delight and in complete indecision over how to act with this monster. Bless her heart, there were tears already building in her eyes.

“See, lovey, it’s a nice horse,” Claire said quickly, seeing the impending meltdown and settling next to them, holding their Thermos of coffee. “What does the horsey say, pumpkin?”

Bree, eager for diversion, produced a startlingly accurate whinny, and accepted applause with good
With a sudden flash of inspiration, Jamie reached out and laid a hand on the beast’s swollen abdomen. “D’ye ken something else, Bree? This one is a mama horse.”

“Mama-horzz?” she repeated, looking sharply at Claire.

“Aye, sweetheart. That means there’s a baby horse inside.”

“Beebee horzz…” she whispered, suddenly enraptured. Bravely, she slipped down from Jamie’s arms onto the ground and, stepping closer to the huge, recumbent body, laid both hands on the jet-black hide next to his. A moment later, she looked up in her usual business-like manner. “Munna lookint th-beebee-horzz, m’okay, Da?”

“No, lass,” he laughed, “we canna look at the babe, yet. She has to stay inside her mama to grow big and strong, first. Then when the right time to be born comes, the wean will—”

With a jolt of realization, Jamie snapped his head around to Claire.

Her courses would have started today—unless she were—

Claire met his eye directly….and shook her head.

“Oh, lass,” he moaned softly, his heart breaking to see the sadness and disappointment in her face, to feel the sorrow in his own heart. He reached for her, pulling her close.

“I know it’s foolish…,” she said, her voice quivering as she wrapped her arms around his waist and burrowed against his shoulder. “There’s no reason it should have happened on the first month…I just can’t help but feel the… loss.”

“It’s no’ foolish, Claire,” he said, being obliged to release one arm from around her to intercept Brianna, who—startled by a sudden shifting from Val—had scurried back, anxiously scrabbling against him. He held them both, but squeezed Claire tightest. “But dinna fash, mo ghraidh: ‘tis only a matter of time.”
Anon prompt: can we have another FMM scene of jamie really missing lallybroch/his family? the little moment in the supermarket broke my heart!

OCTOBER, 1950

Claire stirred and came to life as he laid her gently in their bed and tucked the blankets around her. “What time-zt?” she mumbled.

“Just after nine. Lay your head, lass.”

“But–Breen—” She struggled against the palm he’d laid on her head and she managed a half-sitting position, though she could barely open her eyes. “Brianna—”

“Is already abed,” he promised, putting gentle hands on her shoulders and easing her back down. “Sleep, mo chridhe,” he whispered, pulling the blankets up around her and kissing her cheek. “I’m just going for a walk, aye?”

“Mmmhmm,” she acknowledged sleepily as she relaxed, eyes already closed. “B’safe, love. Take th’ torch?”

“I promise,” he said, turning off the bedside lamp and kissing her once more, lingering with his lips on her temple as he murmured, “I love you.”

“Love…y’too,” she managed from her stupor, giving his hand a squeeze.

Poor lass, he thought as he closed the door and made his way toward the foyer. Claire had had to switch back and forth and back again between day and night shifts for the last week and the irregularity was wreaking havoc on her rest.

The three of them always sat in the living room after dinner, playing, reading, talking, listening to the Radio, and the like. Tonight, Claire had sat down on the sofa with a book whilst he and Brianna played on the floor with cuddly toys, and yet had fallen asleep within the first ten minutes. She needed the sleep and so he was very glad to see her abed early—and he’d wished to go to the wood this evening, in any case.

Jamie pulled on his hat and coat, and though he could feel the small candles and matchbook in his pocket, he took care to bring the Electric Torch for Claire’s sake.

Feeling the familiar pang of fear at thought of leaving them, he made his nightly rounds with all the more care: every window, secure; Bree, snoring away in her bed; Telephone, functioning, ready in case of need; rear garden quiet and still; back door, locked; and, at last, pulling it shut after him, front
door locked as well. Laying his hand and forehead against the door, he closed his eyes in earnest prayer:

“God, shield them…. preserve them from violence and harm, in this place and everyplace; on this night and every night.”

Hands in his pockets for warmth, he made his way down the quiet street, over four blocks, and up the knoll that led to the wooded path behind the neighborhood. The air was brisk and cool, whistling betwixt the trees and shaking the browning leaves into their nocturnal susurrus. In the distance, a dog barked. It wasn’t a mountain, but tonight, the wood held the same peace and stillness that had been a balm to his soul all his life; the peace of being amongst living things that chose to remain silent, waiting.

He felt well, this evening; very well. More than two months’ laboring at Fernacre had brought back his old strength, sapped as it had been by the hunger of the years after Culloden and the months spent seeking Claire. It was a warrior’s body no more, he reflected, but unquestionably strong and muscled, able to do his bidding without the slightest hesitation. Even his senses seemed more acute: though it was an all-but-moonless night due to gathering clouds, he found he had no need of the Torch, able to see clearly the shapes and shadows of the wood; able, even, to find the Fridstool easily in the dark, unmarked a half-mile down from the head of the path.

He squeezed between the hedge of chest-high bushes and stepped into the tiny clearing, hardly bigger than the wee rug in Brianna’s nursery.

It was just as he had left it the week before. All still. All quiet.

Reverently, he knelt and brushed away the Autumn leaves that had fallen since his last visit. He placed the new candles atop the layers of wax in the wee glass jars. They lit quickly and gave the place a tiny, warm glow, the barest of oases in the blue darkness.

Crossing himself, he placed his palm on the largest of the flat, worn stones.

“Hello, Jen.”

_They had discovered the small burying ground only by chance some weeks ago, when a gust of wind had blown Claire’s hat off into the overgrowth to the side of the path._

_It was naught but a handful of stones laid flat in the ground; but neatly grouped, arranged with care. So far from Boston-proper, and with no visible markers bounding it, it was likely a family plot, Claire had said, not a consecrated cemetery; a simple patch of ground chosen as resting place for loved ones in a New World._

_It had been full daylight when they’d happened upon the place, and even then, it was nearly impossible to read the inscriptions. The names and other words appeared only as blurred scratchings; an S here, a Wm there._

_Nearly all the birth and death years, though, had begun with the same two numbers: 17._

_And it had been that that had brought Jamie to his knees._

_“Riding away from Lallybroch in April, I kent I’d never see them again,” he had said—wept—into Claire’s shoulder a long time later._

_“You did?”_
“Aye…I kent that—whether by the noose or rotting in prison, it—it would be heaven before I saw any of them again….“

They had not spoken much of events that had transpired in Scotland after Claire’s departure. The hurt of Culloden, of Murtagh, of the cave, of all of it, was too real and raw, and Claire hadn’t pressed him for detail. Speaking of it now, he knew the memories caused her physical pain, as they did him.

“And in the months since, I’ve thought of them—missed them—longed to see them—Worrit myself half to death wi’ knowing that they’ll have heard of my disappearance and never know what truly happened — that I’m happy and safe….But I havena before thought of—thought of them as—”

Dead.

A hundred years dead or more.

Jenny. Ian. All the bairns. Wee Fergus.

“All of them are dead, Claire.”

“I know….I know….” she’d whispered, her own voice tight as she held him there in the leaves while the grief washed over him. “God, it cuts me like a….Yours is the only true family I’d ever known… and sweet Fergus was…But, darling, they ARE also alive. They did have—WILL have the whole rest of their lives—Good lives!”

But those 17s…17…

“Are they—already in heaven, d’ye—think?” he managed to choke out. There would be bruises on her skin, later, from how tightly he clung to her.

“One—don’t—Well, if—” She’d made a sound of pain and frustration, crying. “Damn it! Damn all of this time rubbish! I don’t know…I really don’t, but I think—”

She’d taken a deep breath that resonated through her limbs into his own body, calming him, somehow. “I think…you have to keep them in your heart as living. Which…” She shuddered. “Maybe that way hurts all the more because… if they’re alive and yet unreachable—”

She’d squeezed him tighter. “But hold on to that; hold on to them how you knew them, because that’s how they are right now. Just think: they’re at Lallybroch right now, tending the sheep and the kailyard…Mrs. Crook is cooking in the kitchen….The children are playing their games…”

“Ian’s telling daft jokes…” Despite himself, he’d felt his features tighten into a smile against her shoulder.

She’d pressed her head tight against his. “They’re alive, Jamie…ALIVE….It’s impossible, I know, but they are alive.”

A long time later, as they were picking themselves off the ground, Claire had said softly. “We—we could find them, if you ever wished to.”

“Find them?” he’d croaked.

“Look in the records….find out what did—will—happen to them. Perhaps we could even — visit Scotland to see their resting places?”
He’d nodded slowly, reeling.

“Someday. But…not soon.”

Because they need to be alive.

They’d come once every week since then, to light candles and say a prayer for their lost family. His wife’s presence was always a comfort; but tonight, alone, he felt truly able to speak his heart to them through these stones, to treat these not as monuments to the dead, but as an open channel to the living.

Jamie felt not the slightest qualm or doubt over speaking — weeping — to them aloud into the night. Perhaps it was the influence of the twentieth century upon him, with its technologies that made the unfathomable possible every day; perhaps it was simple pigheadedness on his part, a refusal to admit futility; but if travel through the fabric of time had been possible—thrice, no less—then his words could reach the hearts of his family, somehow. Perhaps it would be in the voice of a stranger they met on the road; or in the pages of a book as they read in the study; perhaps simply in the whisper of a thought in their own minds as they drifted toward sleep; but they’d know.

“Wee Jamie….You good lad. I ken you’re taking good care of Maggie…Kitty…wee Janet and Michael….I miss hearing all your sweet voices….Be brave for them, and listen well to your Mam and Da, aye?”

“Ian, I miss ye, brother….Every day I wish to have ye here by my side….I pray that it was enough—the gold. I tell myself that there was nothing better I could do…that having me nearby was a danger to your family. But I fear; I fear, brother….If I was wrong to go, forgive me….”

“Jenny….I canna tell ye how many times in this new place I learn of some daft way things are done now, and think, ‘how Jenny will laugh when I tell her of it’ and then I remember that I never can tell ye…that you’re behind the veil…I ken you’re strong and you’ll have no real need of me…but Christ, how I miss ye ….And oh, Jen, that you could meet our Brianna. A Fraser, teeth to toenails, this one…Feisty and cantankerous…ready to put up a skelloc when the moment things are no’ to her liking….and bonnie and canty and clever….and how she’d love her Auntie Jenny….Keep hope, a piuthar.”

And finally, his voice worn and breaking:

“If anything is wrong in my being in this new world…it’s that I had to leave you behind, mon fils….Please…please, dinna ever believe that you’re forgotten to me, a chuisle…”

Jamie felt a lump in his throat as he tried to conjure the memory of the lad’s face. Never forgotten…but all of their faces were more blurred with every passing day. The knowledge of it, that even the vestiges of them would slip away from him, tore at his heart like claws and teeth in the dark.

And yet, Claire’s voice rested on him like a hand on his shoulder:

They’re alive…hold on to that.

His sorcha with him, now and always, Jamie fixed his heart once more on their boy.

“Look after them all, aye? You’re the man of the place when Mister Murray canna be….Be strong for me…and live well, son.”
October 20, 1950

It was not the first time I had noticed that Jamie’s raised eyebrow was quite dashing, no matter how scornfully-raised. “And you’re certain this is what ye want for your birthday, lass?”

“Positive! Dig in, darling!”

The restaurant was dimly lit, but even in the candlelight, I could see that he was staring at the plate of spaghetti bolognese as though it were a sleeping wolverine.

He poked the fragrant mass with his fork. “It just looks so—unwieldy.”

“I have full faith in your ability to wield your dinner,” I laughed, sipping my wine before picking up my fork again.

Jamie watched me carefully, studying, then slowly imitated my motions of twirling the pasta around the fork using the bowl of the spoon as an anchor. I tried my best to stifle giggles into my wine glass as the load slipped off his tines halfway to his mouth not once, but twice. He fixed me with a gimlet eye. “If ye wished your present to be me making a fool of myself, I could think of half a dozen other more enjoyable—”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I snickered, “I’m not laughing, I promise.” I tightened my lips and looked angelically over at him. “Come on, once more?”

He sighed, twirled once more, and managed to get the bite into his mouth.

“So…? What do you think?” I asked eagerly.

“But it’s good!” he said through his mouthful, sounding highly surprised. “A bit slippery, but the sauce is quite nice.” He took a swallow of wine and sat, considering. “Aye, that’s lovely. How d’ye say it? Spag—?”

“Spagh-EH-ti,” I said, in my best exaggerated Italian accent, digging in to my own plate. “I’m so glad you like it! I haven’t had much Italian food before, either, but this is one of Tom and Marian’s favorite joints. You’ll have to have lasagne next time! Definitely less effort required!”

He managed another bite, losing only one noodle on the journey. “Do they have any wee bibs like the ones we have for Brianna? Tasty as it is, I dinna ken how I should be able to finish the serving wi’out splattering myself filthy.”

In the end, he settled for a napkin tucked into his collar, and good thing, too, for otherwise his white shirt would have taken two direct hits before the meal was out.

It was a lovely evening, with good food, good wine, and a gorgeous trio of singers serenading the diners from the far corner.

As the raucous Funiculi Funiculà was replaced by the sweet, sad strains of Musetta’s Waltz over our coffee and tiramisu (which Jamie did not enjoy—“It’s just wet cake!”), Jamie took my hand and
squeezed it, his eyes crinkling with happiness. “Happy Birthday, Sassenach.”

“Thirty-two,” I said, a bit ruefully. “I think that means I’m firmly out of the spring chicken years, don’t you?”

“Hey, now, I’ll have no such talk,” he chided gently. “Every year we have together will be the best year—no matter how old we grow.”

I felt my face grow flush with feeling and in seeing the fervor in his expression. “That’s a good way to think of it. Think we’ll still be this happy when I’m seventy-two?”

“Oh, aye, I’ll stake my life on it. I canna wait to see ye wi’ grey hairs. You’ll be the Sexiest grannie ever seen.”

“You’re unbelievable,” I laughed. “But thank you.”

He stood halfway to lean across the table and kiss my hand. “I’m verra, verra glad ye were born, mo chridhe,” he murmured.

My throat felt thick. “I’m glad you were born, too.”

“Aye, but it’s no’ yet my day for it,” he grinned. As he sat back in his seat, he suddenly looked sharply up at me. “I didna think on it before, but this day is significant for another reason, forbye.”

“Oh? What reason is that?”

“Tis five years to the day since ye first told me the truth….” he said, eyes wide and wondering. “….about where ye truly came from, aye?”

I gasped, remembering.

“Do you know when I was born?” I had hissed, voice tremulous, my hair wild and my eyes staring. “On the twentieth of October, in the Year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and eighteen.”

“Do you hear me?” I demanded, for he was blinking at me unmoving, as though paying no attention to a word I said. “I said nineteen eighteen! Nearly two hundred years from now! Do you hear?”

I had been shouting, but he’d nodded slowly.

“I hear.”

And then a long time later, many frantic words and tears later, he’d looked down at me and smiled faintly.

“Happy Birthday, Sassenach.”

It took me completely by surprise and I’d just stared stupidly at him for a moment. “What?” I’d managed at last.

“I said, ‘Happy Birthday.’ It’s the twentieth of October today.”

“That was quite a day, no?” the present-day Jamie said, refilling my coffee cup and scooting the rest of the tiramisu toward me.
“I was… so scared,” I said, feeling suddenly breathless from the remembered terror.

“Christ, me too,” he agreed with a shudder. “When I saw ye there on the platform in Cranesmuir—
To think they might have burned ye, if I hadn’ arrived in ti—”

“No, no,” I cut in, “not then. I mean, I was terrified during the trial, of course…but it was there in the woods, that I meant. With you.”

That startled him, and I went on. “I was so frightened to tell you about my past. I was convinced you would think me mad—or even the witch you’d just vowed publicly that I wasn’t.”

That same faint smile crossed his lips but he said nothing.

“Tell me truly, Jamie…” I started, my stomach suddenly in knots, dreading the answer. “Did you really believe me…or did you just care for me enough that it was easier for us both that you should pretend to?”

He spoke without hesitation. “No, I believed ye, Sassenach.”

My exhale of relief and my, “But how? Why?” seemed to escape me simultaneously.

“Because your face betrays ye, mo sorcha—it always has. It’s why Colum and Dougal didna trust ye for a moment. They didna ken what it was ye were hiding, only that something was there ye wouldna tell. And in the time after we were made man and wife,” he reached across the tiny table and laid a warm hand on my cheek, “just as I kent your feelings for me were growing wi’ every passing day, I could see that there was something ye were holding back, still, even from me. It’s why I said ‘secrets, but no’ lies,’ aye?” He lowered his hand to gently hold my chin. “But this day, five years ago, was the first time I saw ye look back into my eyes wi’ nothing held back: no lies AND no secrets…. Your eyes told me that ye spoke true, no matter how unbelievable the truth was. And it slew me, Claire, then slew me again…because I knew I had to let ye go; go back to him.”

I couldn’t speak, just then, and he sat back in his seat, shaking his head, dazed. “I still canna believe ye chose me; still canna fathom what I felt when I awoke to find ye there in my arms…thought I surely was dreaming.”

I reached for his hand. “I just…couldn’t give you up.”

“And I thank God for it every day.”

“Me too.”

We sat for a time in silence, touching each others’ rings and feeling the warmth of our hands together.

Jamie was the one that broke the stillness, pulling away with purpose. “Now, as glad as I am that you’re a woman for whom watching a numpty suffer through a plate of Spaghetti is a sufficient birthday present”—he reached down to his feet and withdrew a parcel wrapped in brown paper, “—I did get ye a proper gift as well.”

I grinned and reached for it; a book, surely, from the size and weight. Sure enough, as the paper fell away, I could immediately see the crisp page-edges and the shiny binding that read: Medical Education in the United States: rankings and reviews (1950 ed.)

procedures. Top residencies by specialty. And on and on it went.

“I ken we’ve been talking a great deal about the new bairn and the hope that we’ll conceive soon; but I didna wish ye to think I’d forgotten your other wish. I’ve been reading up on what it’s like—the requirements and the different options you’ll have. I didna ken there were half so many programs in Massachusetts, let alone the whole country!” He gave a small shrug. "Perhaps it all goes wi'out saying, but I wanted ye to hear from my lips that I want ye to go to the best medical school ye can, if that’s your wish—even if it's in—” He hesitated, speaking tentatively. “Hah-wheyyyy?”

“Hawai’i,” I corrected, laughing with happy tears in my eyes.

“Aye, there,” he grinned, “or wherever the best spot for ye may be. Whither thou goest, I will go.”

“Thank you, darling,” I whispered.

“My only requirement,” he said, suddenly stern, “is that you make it so they have to republish this wee book soon, for there isna a single mention of the possibility of a woman attending. Tis all ‘his’ and ‘him’ and ‘gentlemen in the class of such and such.’ You’ll need to change that, aye?”

I grinned at him and shook his hand playfully. “It's a bargain.”
from the tumblr prompt: There would have been A LOT of Irish emigrants in Boston in the 1950s, particularly Irish speakers. There would have been Scots too, but in much smaller numbers and Gàidhlig would have been much less likely to have been spoken for obvious reasons. I’d love to see Jamie overhear Gaelic (Irish Gaeilge or Scottish Gàidhlig, he’d understand both) being spoken, or maybe come across a hurling/shinty game and make a connection

October 31, 1950

“Happy Halloween,” chirruped the pimple-strewn lad pumping the Gasoline.

Jamie gave the boy a smile and a nod. “Aye, many thanks, and the same to—Bree, no!” He lunged across the wide seat of the Ford and grabbed her round the middle. She protested and scrabbled vainly for the door latch she had very nearly gotten open. “My apologies,” he said out the open window as he righted himself, holding the lass firmly on his lap, “she’s quite the handful.”

The boy gave Brianna a little wave. “Got big trick-or-treating plans tonight?”

“Ach, no, not this year. Just a bonfire with some friends.”

Burgers, marshmallows, candy, and beer! Nothing fancy! Tom had assured him. Just bring you, the family, and maybe some ice?

Jamie had left work an hour early to drive home, shower, change into clean clothes, and pick up Brianna to drive the two of them back to Fernacre for Tom and Marian’s gathering. Claire was working overnight, this evening, and Jamie was feeling just that wee bit awkward about the prospect of a social gathering without her at his side. Granted, he would know nearly everyone present; and they were his work comrades, after all; hardly strangers.

Still, when the convenient topics and tasks of work were removed from his social scenarios, there would always come the odd moment where his ignorance of modern times or American tastes or both would be thrust into the spotlight (“What did you think of the game?” or “What’s your favorite John Wayne film?”) and it was Claire who so adeptly diverted attention so he might collect himself, even as he wracked his brain to recall where he had heard the name of Mr. Wayne before.

Still, Claire had her duties, and a festive night shared among good folk (for whom he had genuine affection) certainly outweighed the other available option: being obliged to bide by the door all evening, passing out sweeties to any costumed child that cared to ring the bell. Would that strangers had been so generous when I was wandering Boston looking for Claire. Baffling, the lot of them, these Americans.

“Whoops, I’m sorry, mister, I don’t have enough change,” the boy said apologetically. “Can you hold on a minute while I run inside?”

“Aye, dinna fash, lad.”
The boy blinked and made a face of incomprehension. “Dinner what?” Then, realizing how rude he sounded, he raised his hand, looking distraught and about to start babbling.

“I only said,” Jamie interjected, “Take your time.”

He said it patiently, wanting to be kind, but as soon as the boy was out of sight, Jamie closed his eyes and felt himself sighing, wearily practicing the proper phrases in his mind for the next such time. ‘No problem, man.’ ‘Don’t worry about it, Sport.’ Flatter “R”s. Shove sound to the back of the tongue. Quieter. Less.

“We c’n go-to play th’game, too, Da?” Brianna asked suddenly in Gaelic.

“Game?” He blinked his eyes open and studied her face, looking up from his lap excitedly. “What game d’ye wish to—?”

But then he, too, heard the voices drifting across the lot.

“Oh, definitely: Dan’s crew don’t have a chance.”

“I don’t know, they’ve been training hard—and they’re giving Michael and the boys a run for their money, so far!”

He craned his neck out the window. They were men of about his own age or a little older, their arms loaded with sweeties and Soda Pop bottles from the wee store. And they were speaking GAELIC.

Irish, from the sound of it, the Gaeilge; but the cadence and syllables were so like his own mother tongue that he actually was gasping from the rush of shock and euphoria.

He was just about to call after them, but at that moment, the young attendant reappeared. Jamie hastily completed the transaction, tipping a bit too heavily as he watched the men out of the corner of his eye, feeling a pang of dismay as they disappeared down over the hill beside the filling station. Jamie thought he could hear the sounds of a small crowd not far off.

“Beg your pardon,” Jamie blurted, as the attendant was walking away. “What’s going on over the hill, there?”

“Just a bunch of Irish playing—it’s kind of like football, but with sticks and they’re loud as all get out!” he laughed confidentially.

“Game, Da!” Bree whispered in Gaelic.

“They’re harmless, though, I promise,” the boy said hastily, leaving Jamie to wonder what exactly might be feared from a bunch of Irishmen. The boy blanched. “Oh but you’re—you’re Irish youself. I didn’t mean any—” He didn’t bother to correct the boy as to his heritage, simply thanked him once more and sent him on his way.

He checked his Watch, and finding that they were still ahead of schedule, he set Bree on the seat next to him, saying in Gaelic, “Aye, a leannan, let’s DO go see the game.”

It was a group of about thirty men on the field, playing a fast-paced game that Jamie wagered was very close indeed to shinty. The players’ wives and families (and a fair number more, it seemed) were congregated on the sidelines, tending wee coal-grills, drinking, chatting, and calling after the
swarms of children running about hither and thither. *And all of it was in Gaelic.* Jamie wanted to cry, just hearing and seeing this slice of something so like home, the drink-fueled joy of a Gathering, something he hadn’t experienced in many, many years. He could feel the warmth of it all surrounding him with every step he took closer, like the arms of a long-lost friend slowly coming around him.

As he and Bree drew within a few dozen yards, a whistle sounded and the match broke. The players jogged to their wives and comrades to drink and chat. One man on the nearest edge of the crowd, dark-haired and wiry, caught sight of Jamie and did a double-take, turning sharply to face him in the first pink rays of nearing-sunset. “Can I help you?” he called in English, strongly accented; not *unkindly,* but definitely on guard.

Jamie called back a greeting in as close to *Gaeilge* as he could recall, though he wasn’t at all confident in his pronunciation.

It must have been close enough, though, for the man’s face brightened at once. “*HEY, NOW!*” he roared, walking forward with his arms raised in welcome. “A new kinsman! What county?”

“*County *Scotland,* I’m afraid,” Jamie replied, slipping into the *Gàidhlig* without thinking as he returned the man’s warm handshake. “James Fraser, and my daughter Brianna. Do forgive me for intruding; it’s only that it’s been so verra long since I heard anything like my own tongue. I just couldn‘a resist seeing what was what.”

“And we’re glad you did! It’s grand to get to meet a new cousin from the old places.”

The Irish tongue *did* have its differences, certainly, but Michael Riley seemed to have no trouble understanding Jamie, nor he, him, with only the occasional *What was that word?* or confidential laugh over differences in emphasis or tone.

Bree had been staring at Michael intently, apparently *astonished* at hearing Gaelic spoken at close range by someone other than her Da. When Jamie nudged her, she gave a tiny, startled ‘*Hi*’ in English, then grinned and buried her face in his shoulder, making both men laugh.

“D’ye live in these parts yourself, Fraser?” Michael asked eagerly.

“Not far, but no—I was just stopping for Gasoline on my way out to the countryside. Do all of ye live nearby, then?” Jamie asked, astonished, surveying the huge, lively crowd of players and onlookers.

“Sure do—the station owner turns a blind eye to us using the field, thank the saints, else we’d all likely be arrested.”

“Arrested? For playing a wee game?”

“Well, technically, it *could* be considered trespassing—have a drink?” Jamie politely refused and Michael shrugged, wiping his sweaty brow and taking a deep swig from his own bottle. “There’s a long history of bad blood between Irish and the other folk in Boston. I’m sure there’s plenty of arseholes that would love to see us get comeuppance for whichever dumb mick offended great-great-uncle so and so.”

Perhaps that went some way toward explaining the odd looks Jamie tended to get when speaking to strangers about Boston. He’d always tacitly assumed something in his manner was out of place in some indeterminate way—*some eighteenth-century way,* that is—but perhaps it was that he was being assumed *Irish* in a place where that wasn’t altogether a pretty thing to be. He would have to ask Claire.
Christ, he chuckled to himself, an Outlander thrice over, he was, in Boston. At least he wasn’t the only one.

Michael introduced him to the members of his team, one and all bringing Jamie and Bree further into the crowd, offering drinks, and asking about their history and family. He felt as if he’d walked into a clan gathering, even after only ten minutes among the Irish. “And what about you, then?” he asked of Michael, after giving his (presumed) backstory for the half-dozenth time, “From whence in Ireland do you folk hail?”

“Well, we’re mostly Corkmen here—” Michael said, which elicited cheers from the Cork contingent. “Some like me, born here stateside, but plenty of folk fresh off the boat, like Barny, there, except he’s from Tipperary. Then there’s Fergal whose folk are from Sligo,” he said, scanning the crowd and methodically cataloging. “Then Vance and Peter and the other Michael, of Galway. And then over there, there’s Charlie, but he’s not—OY!” He gave a sudden whoop of excitement and cupped his hands around his mouth to yell, “EY, CHARLIE!! COME OVER HERE!! FOUND YE A WEE CLANSMAN!!”

A stocky blonde man jogged over eagerly and Michael clapped him on the shoulder. “Charlie, here, plays for those bastards on Dan’s team, but we won’t hold it against him just at present. Charlie, this is James—James, right? Aye, good—James Fraser. He’s from your precious highlands!”

Charlie was an open, eager sort, ruddy-faced and jovial, quick with a joke and an easy word. Jamie quickly learned from rapid conversation in the Gàidhlig that the man was a Highlander-born, a MacAlister whose family had come to America when he was nearly sixteen. He’d hated the new place, and had planned to return to Scotland the moment as he was of age; but then war had broken out just days before his eighteenth birthday, and he’d been compelled to go fight. He worked as a builder, now, feeding the demand for suburban homes from families in the growing prosperity of the post-war times. Jamie decided he truly liked the man, and knew without asking that he must have children himself, when he grinned at Bree and said, “And hello there, a leannan,” with a little bow.

“Hi, how-wer you?” she responded, to Jamie’s astonishment, in almost-perfect Gàidhlig.

“I’m verra well, thank ye verra much for asking, sweet lass,” the blonde man laughed, straightening and looking impressed. “Does she speak it at home, then?”

“No, not often,” Jamie said, rather apologetically. “I do try to speak it around her when I think of it, but her mam is English, so we—”

“American, you mean?”

“Nay,” Jamie laughed, with a mock-sneer, “an honest-to-goodness Sassenach.”

Charlie matched Jamie’s manner with groan of false-disgust. “Christ, but ye must have balls of steel, Jamie, to — oh!” he said abruptly, looking a bit embarrassed, “Sorry—is it alright that I call ye Jamie?”

Jamie could feel the warmth of kinship flood through him like water. “Of *course,* friend,” he said with feeling.

Charlie introduced his Irish wife Saoirse and their two small boys, to whom Bree took at once, sharing their toys on the grass.

They talked about Scotland, about America, about Boston. About Gaelic. About talk of a free and independent Scotland. About the Celtic traditions that had crossed the ocean, and those that had not.
Of gatherings that apparently took place all around the country, in hill-and-mountain places, for folk to remember the old clan ways, even if in naught but a faint imitation. Even of bannocks, whiskey, and wool; the simple things of highland home, even two hundred years hence, it seemed. It was more a balm to Jamie’s heart than he could comprehend: that the Scotland he knew hadn’t vanished entirely.

A whistle blew and Charlie brandished his stick deftly as the crowd began to shift. “Ever played a game of hurling?”

“It’s like shinty, no?”

“Not too far off, not at all. Here,” he said, beginning to walk backward toward the pitch, “come wi’ me and I’ll give ye the rundown.”

With a jolt, Jamie noted the position of the sun and remembered the ice in the back of the Car. “Sadly, we must be going, Charlie.”

“Oh, come on!” Charlie wheedled, taking one last deep swig of beer and kissing Saoirse exuberantly. “Wee Brianna seems to be having a fine time wi’ Nolan and Will. And I’ve got some extra gear if —”

“it isna that at all,” Jamie said, turning an apologetic smile toward his new companion, “it’s only that we’ve got a Halloween gathering to attend, and we’re expected shortly.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. First one since you arrived? Weel, it isna nearly so ghostly as Samhain, let me tell ye. All the spooks you’re like to encounter look as if they came out from a children’s book or a Walt Disney film. I tell wee Nolan when he’s scart in the night that all the ghosts are back in Scotland. No doorways to the otherworlds in America, so no Old Folk to be afraid of.”

(Oh, aye? Ye have one right in front of ye, man.)

Charlie held out the stick once more, inviting. “Sure ye canna be persuaded to celebrate wi’ us instead, Jamie?”

“I truly canna stay, but thank ye, Charlie, I should verra much have liked to.” Jamie knelt to break up the play-circle. “Can ye say ‘farewell’ to your new friends, Bree?”

“Farewell,” she chirped, waving her chubby hand enthusiastically.

“That’s not th’ right way,” chided Nolan, who was a year or two older. “You say it funny.”

Bree looked crestfallen, but Charlie ruffled his son’s hair, laughing as he gently scolded. “Nay, a chuisle, you’ve just grown up wi’ Gaeilge—YOU’RE the one who ‘says it funny.’”

Jamie scooped Bree into his arms, whispering in her ear about how proud he was of her before turning back to Charlie. “Do ye play every week, then? I’d truly be honored to come back another time.”

“Oh aye. The winter snows will start falling soon, but we’re here most every chance we can get, when the ground’s clear.” Charlie sized him up frankly, nodding with approval. “You’re a braw-looking fucker, alright. Dinna let Michael steal ye for his lousy crew, aye? They’re naught but loud bastards. The *real* talent’s wi’ us.”

Jamie made a general farewell to the crowd and received a hearty chorus of well-wishes and toasts in return.
“At the risk of seeming too eager, Jamie…” He turned to see that Charlie was looking sheepish, “might the wife and I have ye and the family over for dinner, sometime?”

When Jamie didn’t immediately respond, the man shrugged, but didn’t falter. “Mebbe it’s daft, but as much as I love my Irish folk, it’s grand having someone to talk to in the old ways again; who’s truly my countryman. D’ye ken what I mean?”

Jamie swallowed down the lump in his throat as he clasped the man’s hand. “Aye, a caraidh, I ken it more than ye can possibly know.”
The First Step

Chapter Summary

From the anon prompt: "Loved how Jamie gave claire the medical book in the Boston story. Can we maybe see her starting to look at which one she wants to go to? Does she have her sights set on Harvard??"

November, 1950

CEBF

“Jamie?” I called urgently across the evening-shadowed house, rustling the pages on the rolltop. “Jamie? Did you move my essay?”

Ah yes, My Essay:

Why should you be admitted to Harvard University’s Program for Correspondent Students?

Well, you see, honorable gentlemen of the admissions committee, my applications for medical school a few years hence—even if not at Ivy League institutions—will need to look as goddamned impressive as can possibly be mustered, since they will almost certainly be reviewed by a panel of elderly male fuddy-duddies like yourselves.

Thus, having Harvard University on my CV (even if it’s only for these pre-requisite courses), will only serve to impress said fuddy-duddies, and as a female with a spotty-at-best record in formal education, I need all the bloody help I can get.

The almost-final draft of my personal statement had been more subtle, but it was God’s honest truth.

I’d been working incessantly on the damned thing for weeks, sleeping little and poorly from the stress. I’d downed more coffee than I’d previously have deemed safe for human beings, and was looking and feeling decidedly the worse for wear for it all.

Meanwhile, my sainted husband had tirelessly picked up my slack with the house and with Bree night after night as I hunched over the desk, scribbling and scratching out. This last week, in particular, he’d given me more than enough space, bless him, speaking softly, keeping Bree out of my hair, giving kisses, but not initiating sex, nor even the casual touches that were so much a part of our daily rhythm with one another. I knew he meant well by it—to allow me to focus my non-hospital- and non-sleep-hours upon the task at hand…but LORD, another part of me wished that he would just hoist me out of my chair, throw me onto the ground, and give me an hour’s rough relief from my own mind and Harvard blasted University! I didn’t hold it against him, of course, and it would be over soon, in any case, but his walking on eggshells around me was its own breed of stress.

‘Stress’—such a tiny word for so much inner turmoil. It wasn’t just the essay in front of me or the
way my gut had felt all tied in knots for the past week; it was the entire trajectory of which this was only the first step: the prerequisite courses, the MCATs, applications, interviews, medical school, internship, residency, fellowship—the next decade or more of my life! So much would hinge on every single decision I made from here on out. I couldn’t afford any mistakes, starting with this bloody essay.

I had put the entire packet together last night in the Manila envelope: application, references, ESSAY. Stamps, on. Addresses, penned. Seal…well…left UN-sealed, because I wasn’t bloody ready. And good thing, too, for I’d spent my entire shift that day replaying the words in my mind, every phrase sounding wretched, every choice of words trite or cliché or childish, and screaming for another revision. I’d rushed home, called a ‘hello, darling,’ to Jamie, who was tucking Bree in for the night, and then gone directly to the rolltop, still in my coat and hat, to read it through again and exorcise this demon. Except my packet wasn’t there.

“Jamie??” I called again, louder, my anxiety mounting. I hissed at two sudden papercuts as I rummaged frantically again through the stack. “Darling? Did Penelope say anything about moving—”

“Sassenach, keep your voice down, for God’s sake—” Jamie whispered loudly as he came around the living room door, looking harried. “Brianna’s only just gotten to sleep, lass!”

I lowered my voice but not my urgency, and I barely even looked up. “The envelope with my application and personal statement? Have you seen it? I swear, it was right on top of the stack with the blue folder here on the desk.”

“Oh, aye, I sent it in.”

“What?” I laughed weakly, still rummaging. “Ha-ha, very funny.”

“I did,” he said simply, “I mailed it in.”

I froze. And STARED at him. “What?”

“It was complete. The deadline was coming up in a few days; so,” he shrugged, ACTUALLY shrugged, “I mailed it in for ye.”

“It was NOT complete.”

The words came out low and lethal, and I could see Jamie’s shirt-too-tight-shrug that indicated he heard the danger in them. “Ye packed it all in the mailing envelope, no? It was ready to be submitted.”

“Yes, but I wasn’t ready to send it yet!”

He made a small sound of carefully-controlled exasperation. “Claire, mo chridhe, how should I have known th—”

“You should have asked! You should have called me at work to ASK!” I threw up my hands. “Not just assumed that I was ready to have it sent off without my permission!”

He squirmed perceptibly but wasn’t giving in. “Lass, you’ve been slaving over that essay for weeks. You’ve barely slept—You put it in the envelope, wi’ the address and stamps and everything. I read it again last night after ye went to bed and it was perfect.”

“It wasn’t—
The truth was that despite my obsessing over it, it HAD probably been as bloody close to perfect as I could get it. I’d double-checked and triple-checked and quadruple-checked; revised and wordsmithed it to within an inch of its life. But I’d wanted to wait ‘til the very last moment to send it in, to feel absolutely certain it was as good as I could make it; and having that control so unexpectedly pulled out from beneath me—

“—Even if it had been, Jamie, you still had no—NO—bloody right—”

He ran his hands back through his hair. “Sassenach, come now, it’s no’ as though—”

“Jamie, this isn’t a recipe I’m sending to a Ladies’ Magazine!” I didn’t know what to do with my hands but they gestured wildly in my livid rage and tears. “This is—was—Harvard!”

“I ken it IS Harvard,” he said pointedly, putting his hands firmly on my shoulders “—and I ken you’re going to be ACCEPTED there when they read your—”

“And what the hell would YOU know about it?” I snapped, perceiving only the hurt flashing across his face before I was down the hallway and into the bathroom, locking the door. I yanked the shower handle and sunk down against the tub, letting the water mask the sounds of my weeping.

A few minutes later, Jamie was knocking softly on the door.

“Sassenach?”

His voice was quiet, and, I thought, abashed. “Claire…? May I come in?”

I covered my mouth so he couldn’t hear me. I felt tears trickling over my hand but I wouldn’t open my eyes. *It’s not the end of the world, Beauchamp.*

Another knock.

A long silence.

“Lass….I’m sorry…”

He was leaning against the door, I thought.

“It was…an impulsive thing I did— I—” he sighed miserably. “—I thought better of it throughout the day, but…Christ, i’m sorry…It was foolish. I was wrong to do it…”

A long silence.

A long…long silence.

“I’m truly…truly sorry, Claire.”

I took a deep breath.

Then another.

Once more.

It would be alright. I hadn’t been ready, but the essay was fine. Jamie regretted what he’d done. It would be alright.

But I was too spent and too upset to consider opening the door.
He HAD been wrong to do it—knew not ten minutes after the post had gone that he’d made a grave error in judgement. But the essay had been perfect, BRILLIANT, and Claire had been so plagued by self-doubt over it. It was as if she had placed her entire sense of her own worth upon success in this single endeavor, this single writing. He’d simply wished her to feel as if she had finally accomplished the thing, after such a harrowing period these last few weeks.

But she was completely right: what he wished her to feel was irrelevant, and he had betrayed her trust. She was well within her rights not to be ready to forgive him.

He waited more than an hour, until long after he’d heard her enter the bedroom; giving her the space she apparently wanted. At last, though, he entered the darkened room.

She was already in bed with her back turned to him. Asleep? He couldn’t tell—but even if she were awake, he didn’t expect her to speak until morning. He deserved her fury for at least that long.

He undressed and slipped quietly under the covers, taking care not to jostle her. Without really thinking about it, he mirrored her posture, coming to rest on his side, facing away from her.

He listened to the clock tick and tried to let it lull him to sleep.

One minute.

Two.

Three.

Four.

“Can’t you at least bring yourself to have sex with me?” Sharp. Wide awake. Dangerous.

Startled, he blurted, bewildered. “Bring myself—?”

He felt her bolt upright beside him, her hands slamming onto the bedspread. Her voice was still laced with anger, but desperate, forbye, and hurting. “Jamie, you haven’t touched me in a week! I need to—to feel close to—”

“You’ve never wished me to have ye during your courses before, Sassenach,” he said, scrubbing his hand over his face as he rolled onto his back. “Do ye really want to that badly tonight?” His ‘especially when you’re not too keen on me at the moment, in any case,’ was implied. He would serve her, of course, if she wished it, but—

“I’m not on my goddamned ‘courses,’ you absolute bastard!”

Jamie opened his mouth to fire back.

— but then, she gasped—

—a tiny sound, barely more than a sharp breath, really, but so deeply unlike Claire that—

He was on his knees beside her in an instant. She was kneeling on the mattress, too, clad in only her underclothes, both hands clapped over her mouth. “Oh, God,” she croaked between her fingers, her
eyes wide and wide and wider.

"Mo ghraidh—?" He grappled for her face, pushing back the wildness of her hair to hold her between his hands. "Mo chridhe —? you're—?"

"Oh—God!" she said again, eyes brimming and hyper-focused upon nothing, her mouth gaping open and shut, "—I didn’t—I was so busy, I hadn’t been—No—" she moaned softly as he lifted her and gathered her, cradled her to him. Her body was rigid, pushing back, and her head shaking violently back and forth. "No," she wept, "no, no, it's—Jamie, it’s too soon." He could see her eyes sparkling with life through her tears, even as she tried to resist the truth. "We can’t—can’t know for certain—not yet."

"Six days, Claire—" he gasped, his free hand roaming up her back to cup her cheek, hard. "One day—two days, maybe, but—SIX?"

She lowered her fingers tentatively to graze the natural curve of her belly. Jamie watched in a trance as her palm slowly came to lay flat against her skin. "Oh, God," she whispered, swaying on her knees and leaning her forehead against his shoulder as her arms came around him. "Jamie... Jamie..."

He held her and rocked her (THEM!) and kissed her, crying, laughing—but then remembered—

"I'm—truly sorry about the application, mo nighean donn," he choked out, feeling the guilt seize this moment of joy. "It was your task—your choice—It wasna my place at all to—"

"Forgiven," she whispered, putting her fingers to his lips and shaking her head. "Forgiven.... And I'm sorry, too....for what I said—I didn’t mean—"

He kissed her, and she kissed him, and there was nothing except her arms; her fingers cupping the back of his head; the taste of her tears and his; her lips; her sweet voice, breaking. "Jamie...Jamie, I'm so—happy—"

He couldn’t say a word. He could only nod his head slowly over and over again, completely overcome, his shoulders shaking. His heart felt ready to burst as he watched his wife, her face shining, go softly to her back and reach up for him. "Come to me?"

And he came to her, made love to her—the only woman he’d ever had; the only one he would ever have in his lifetime.

And as he lay awake long after, holding her, cupping the bairn that slept within her, he prayed; but unlike the night more than two years ago when he’d held Brianna in this same fashion, heart breaking from despair and fear and the looming specter of death, his prayer this night was hopeful and strong.

Lord...that this child will be safe.
Eggs

Chapter Summary

from the tumblr prompt: "soooo happy that FMM claire has a bun in the oven!!! would love to see a classic pregnancybrain moment that she gets to share with jamie. mine hit me worst at 5 or 6 weeks in!"

“God—DAMMNIT!”

Jamie came awake and jumped out of bed in one single second, stumbling toward the sound of her voice in the kitchen. Stumbling; not running. He knew from her tone that there was no danger to hand: a ‘goddamnit’ of frustration only. Nonetheless, it was the middle of the night, and Claire—unpredictable and mad as she was, on the whole—didn’t usually take to screaming at random.

She was standing over the stove, her hands in fists at her sides and her robe slipping off her shaking shoulders.

“Claire, love?” He put a hand on the small of her back. “Have ye burned yourself?”

“NO, the—blasted stove is broken—” She was agitated and angry and looked as though she were going to lay a kick to the offending appliance. “I just wanted to scramble eggs but they’re not—not —cooking!”

“No? What’s wrong, d’ye think?” he asked, glancing at the pan, which sure enough, held only wet, raw eggs.

“The damned—stove is broken—” she repeated, teeth gritted in frustration as she gestured wildly at the item in question. “I just don’t understand, it was working fine at dinner—but — ”

She gulped air. Then, she burst into tears.

“Och, hey, shhhh it’s no matter, lass,” he said, half-laughing as he pulled her to him and hugged her tight. “Hey, now, it’s alright—we’ll get a repairman out, if we must—”

She sobbed into his shoulder. “I’ve been trying for ten minutes and I don’t—I don’t—I just wanted EGGS — ”

“Dinna fash, mo nighean donn,” He choked back a laugh and only rubbed her back, swaying her as though they were dancing cheek-to-cheek, like the song said. “Here, let me make ye something that doesna require heat — ” He went mute, gobbled for a moment, then pursed his lips hard together, his wame now convulsing madly from the effort not to burst out laughing .

“What?” she said sharply at his sudden silence. She pulled back enough to glare at him. “WHAT?”

Without a word, but with his lips quivering, he released one hand from her waist, reached over….and turned on the Stovetop.

You willna laugh, James Fraser.
BY HEAVEN, YE *WILL NOT* LAUGH ALOUD AT YOUR PREGNANT WIFE!

But thank GOD his pregnant wife cackled first.

She dropped her forehead against his shoulder, wrapped her arms around his neck, and positively SHOOK with laughter, bringing him right along with her. They slumped against each other, hooting like the wee fools they were.

“Oh Jesus H. CHRIST, what is WRONG with me??” she moaned as she stepped away from him a few minutes later, wiping away tears and still giggling.

“Dinna fash yourself,” he said, turning the Stove off again. “It’s common early in a woman’s carrying, no? To feel a bit daft from time to time?”

“Well, yes, so they say, but—”

“Jen told me once that when she was newly wi’ child (I think it was wi’ Wee Jamie, come to think) she lost her favorite book of French folktales and was near-distraught. Then the next planting season, she was turning the soil of the kailyard and up came Contes des Fées along with the rotted cabbage roots.”

“Oh, Jenny,” Claire hooted, leaning back against the counter. “Well, that does make me feel a bit less insane. It’s just so strange—I don’t remember anything of the sort with Faith or Brianna.”

“No, indeed?”

“I should have thought that by my third pregnancy, I would have seen it all! Apparently not!”

He stepped into her arms and kissed her deeply. He didn’t want to voice the sad thoughts running through his mind. The still-raw grief from the loss of Faith. That at this phase of her last pregnancy, Claire had been close to starvation from months of war on the slow march toward Culloden. Much might have been missed, amid that bleak time; much had been missed, since.

But those sorrows were of another life, and had no place in the foolish glee of this night. He said only, “No child of ours would make things easy for us, would they?”

“No indeed.” She rubbed her abdomen and made a stern face at it. “Just don’t make Mummy jump off a cliff or anything permanent, alright, little one?”

Jamie grinned and added his hand, spanning them both. “Aye, young Fraser, be nice to your Mama, or you’ll have ME to answer to.” They both sighed then, with twin, happy, humming sounds.

Jamie did some quick calculation. “It’ll be August, aye?”

She smiled and nodded. “I think so—can’t say for sure precisely when we conceived, but yes, August approximately.” She suddenly groaned. “Oh, LORD, that means I’ll be carrying a 7-, 8-, and 9-month baby in SUMMER.”

“Well, never you fear, Sassenach: I’ll be here with all the lemonade and cool cloths ye might desire.”

“Well, that sounds much better than last time. God, this time next year, we’ll have him or her with us. Can you imagine?” She beamed.

As did he, imagining. A new bairn. A wee brother or sister for Brianna. Getting to see Claire carry a
child in peace and under the care of doctors. Getting to hold his child from the moment they would be born….

He kissed her temple. “Go sit yourself down, mo ghraidh, while I make ye some eggs.”

“Oh, no, I can do it!” She turned toward the Stovetop, catching up the Spatula. “Now that I know it’s just a matter of turning ON the bloody —”

He turned her firmly away and settled her into the chair. “I insist.”

“You really don’t have to wait on me hand and foot, Jamie—I’m perfectly capable, and for all my teasing, I don’t expect royal treatment.”

“Aye, I ken that. But it’s my joy to take care of ye, Sassenach. Always, but—particularly now that you’re carrying our child.” He took the Spatula from her hand in a manner that brokered no argument.

She sighed and then grinned up at him. “Well in that case, I’d feel much better cared for if you’d put cheese on the top.”

“Your wish is my command, your majesty.” He opened the Frigidaire, peering. “Sorry, I dinna think we have any.”

“No, no, I know we do,” she said, furrowing her eyebrows and glancing confidently around the kitchen. “Just had it in my hand a few min—oh for fuck’s sake—”

She walked with dignity to the counter, and oh-so-casually picked up the block of cheese.

*From the soap dish.*
“Happy Thanksgiving, Frasers!” Marian Harper sang out as she opened the door.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” we chorused in return, arms full of Bree and wine and basket of lemon meringue pie.

“Oof, come in out of the rain,” she clucked, ushering us into the warmth of her cozy foyer. “Though I guess we should thank our lucky stars it’s only rain, not the blizzard they’re getting down south!”

“Oh, aye,” Jamie agreed, deftly extricating Bree from her raincoat while still holding her. “Made it a bit slow-going on the drive over, but much preferable to snow.”

“And the rain’s good luck for Miss Bree! Happy BIRTHDAY, sweet pea!”

Thus addressed, Bree giggled and lurched forward into Marian’s arms, surprising all of us.

“Glad to see she’s finally getting less intent on clinging only to Mama and Da,” I laughed. Jamie helped me out of my coat and sweetly kissed my cheek as we followed Marian into the living room. “I suppose being properly two years of age makes a difference, after all!”

---

Earlier that day

“Our wee lass doesna appear to be verra sensible of the grand occasion, Sassenach.”

I wiped my hands and turned quickly from the stove (which YES, I’d managed to turn on, thank you very much), beaming. Sure enough, Bree seemed about as interested in festivities as the average boulder. She had both arms around Jamie’s neck and was making it quite clear she was not in the mood to be up and about.

“Well, I suppose she doesn’t remember her last one, little as she was,” I conceded, coming close to tickle Bree lightly in the side. “Guess what, lovey-dove? It’s your BIRTHDAY!”

The dramatic excitement in my tone made her bolt upright at once, hair wild: curlywig to end all curlywigs. “S’bird-day?” she demanded.

“Yes, baby, it’s your birthday!”

“What-is ‘at, Mama? Mama?” She continued to screw her face up at me in concentration as Jamie buckled her in to the high chair. “What-IS ‘at, bird-day? Mama? Mama, what?”

“It means,” Jamie offered, settling next to her and putting out one of his hands for hers, “the day you were *born,* a leannan.”

“What-is-it, ‘bornd,’ Daddy?”

“It means the day God gave ye to Mama and me,” he said patiently, “So, it’s a verra special day, aye?”
“What-is-’at?’” she said immediately, lacing her fingers together and flapping them about. “Daddy, dinna kennit. What is-’at ‘spedchill’?”

Jamie sighed, love and exasperation so perfectly mingled in that way unique to parents. “‘Special’ means…the verra best. Just like you, sweet wee cub.”

“See my-dese jammies?” she chirped, changing direction with lightning speed. “Dey’re porpoor, Daddy, see’um?”

“Aye,” he laughed, “I see, a leannan.”

She pulled at the fabric of her top. “Dey’re spedchill?”

“Aye, those are verra SPECIAL purple Jammies,” he said, meeting my eye and trying not to laugh.

“Your birthday,” I said significantly, walking over to them with Bree’s breakfast held high, “is the day where Mama and Daddy talk about how JUST how much we LOVE our Bree.” I bent and latched onto her sweet, dimpled cheek in a huge, long mmmmmmm-ing kiss and Jamie came in to do the same on the other. Bree, caught between us in a smooch sandwich, was giggling so hard she was fit to choke.

“Those are your first presents,” I said pulling back. “Two kisses for your second birthday. And here’s the next!” I slid the plate onto the tray in front of her for inspection.

“Sassenach….That is…” Jamie looked up at me with the queerest expression on his face. “…the *Cutest* thing I’ve ever seen.”

It was little more than a circle with two lopsided ears, but I’d embellished a snout with banana slices and chocolate chips for nose and eyes, and powdered sugar to top things off.

Yes, it was fairly bloody adorable.

Bree squealed. “Issa—Lookint-’im-that-wee BEAR, Daddy!” She hooted in delight and then began promptly to demolish said wee bear.

“You’d best slow down, mo chridhe!” Jamie laughed. “He’s going to roar in your tummy for gobbling him up so fast!”

Bree’s mouth was so full she couldn’t reply, but there came a happy, muffled *mmphurr?!!* that signified her excitement to see this play out as soon as humanly (bearly?) possible.

“So neither of you have ever had Thanksgiving before?” Tom asked as he poured Jamie a glass of wine in the sitting room.

“No, indeed!” I settled back onto the sofa with a cup of tea. “A singularly American holiday, this one.”

Tom furrowed his brows. “But you were here stateside last year too, weren’t you, Claire?”

“Oh, yes, well….Yes, but I wasn’t in the going-out frame of mind, to be honest.”
“It was a different life, before you came back, Jamie,” Marian said knowingly, beaming from the floor, where Bree was sitting on her lap playing with her birthday present from the Harpers. “We’re glad you did.”

“As am I, a nighean,” he said warmly to her, then met eyes with me. Glad doesna even begin to express it.

It would have been a thoroughly lovely moment, except morning sickness had come a-calling with a VENGEANCE today, and I had to close my eyes while yet another urge to vomit abated.

Jamie noticed and made as if to come to me, but just then, the doorbell rang, followed almost immediately thereafter by Della O’Malley running head-on into Jamie and nearly spilling his wine as she barreled around the corner. He managed to catch her with his free hand, and she looked as though he’d hung the bloody moon. “Hi, Mr. Fraser,” she said breathlessly, gazing up into his face.

“Happy Thanksgiving to ye, Miss Della.” He kissed her hand, which sent her into paroxysms. Jesus H. Christ, the girl needed a cold shower, pronto.

Thankfully, though, it seemed her glow wasn’t *entirely* due to infatuation with Jamie. “Claire! Claire, guess what?” she said, bouncing in my direction.

“Peter asked you to go steady?” She’d been talking about this boy for weeks, it was about time he made a move.

“YES!!” she squealed, thudding into a chair next to me. “Can you BELIEVE IT!??!”

“Wine, Claire?” Tom said, coming over with a glass.

“Oh, no, thank you.”

“Whisky, then?

“No, thank you, Tom, I’m all—” Good Heavens, I nearly burped in the poor man’s face, but managed to choke back the wave of acute nausea and croak, “— all set with my tea.”

I could have sworn Marian gave me a suspicious look, but thankfully, Jamie came to my aid. “So, from what I gather, the festivity centers around coming together and eating in a spirit of gratitude. But that’s about all I ken of it. Is there more?”

I had told him the story earlier that morning, in fact, but I was grateful for the diversion while Tom gave the Proud Son of Massachusetts recitation of the Thanksgiving tale.

Jamie nodded in approval. “Thanks be to God for the kindness of the native folk, then. I must say, I enjoy hearing tales of anyone that managed to fly in the face of the English crown—Sorry Sassenach,” he added with a grin.

“Does Scotland not belong to England?” Della asked, bewildered.

“Depends on who ye ask,” Jamie laughed. “Suffice it to say, there’s a reason the marriage between Claire and me raised no small number of eyebrows.”

“But you married anyway,” Della swooned, “how romANTIC!!”

Jamie grinned and sat down next to me. “Verra romantic indeed.” He saw my pallor and squeezed my hand, speaking low so only I could hear. “Are ye feeling alright, Sassenach?”
“Bit queasy,” I admitted, resisting the urge to clutch my abdomen.

“Can I get ye anything?”

“No,” I whispered, squeezing his hand. “But thank you. Just have to wait for young Fraser here to settle down.”

He smiled and ducked his head, trying not to let the others see the direction of his tender gaze.

We had agreed not to announce the pregnancy until the three-month mark, as was customary. We knew better than anyone that tragedy could still strike after the first trimester, but had decided that for Brianna’s sake, at least, it was best to wait until the highest risk of miscarriage was past….even though acknowledging the possibility of losing another child sent claws of fear tearing at my heart.

But I’d carried one child safely; Lord willing, I could do so again.

*Please, Lord, keep this little one safe.*

Jamie wrapped one arm around my waist and pulled me closer. “I *am* thankful, today, ye ken?” he whispered.

“Oh?” I murmured back, looking into his eyes, curious, but already smiling from the tone in his voice. “Whatever for?”

“For our daughter. For you carrying her. Giving her life, this day two years ago. For—” His voice caught, just barely. “—For how ye went on living when ye didna wish to…” He gently touched my face. “For working as hard as ye do, at home and at the hospital….For being my wife. For….well…” He very discreetly touched my belly. “*For our children.* And for taking care of us in this new world”

I ran my hand down the side of his face, unable to speak as I kissed him. Come what might in 1951, never had I had a year in which there was so much for which to give thanks as 1950.

“I’m going to shrivel up and DIE from how much you love each other,” came Della’s tremulous threat. “Just you *WAIT.*”
Late November, 1950

[CEBF]

“Bath time, little smudge!”

Bree squealed and, like a shot, went barreling toward the bathroom. Turning two years old seemed to have turned on a tap of perpetual energy from on high: energy to throw tantrums, energy to hate going to bed, energy to form VERY strong opinions about what she did and did not plan to eat, and so on, and so forth for all time.

However, she had also decided she loved baths, and by the time I arrived at the tub myself, she was already standing on the bathmat, triumphantly nude and brimming with expectation with her toys in hand. I laughed and kissed the top of her head. “One minute, you goofy girl.”

I poked my head briefly into the living room. “Do you want bath duty or bedtime duty tonight?”

“I’ll take bed, if it’s all the same to you, Sassenach,” Jamie said, looking up from the rolltop. “I’d like to get the rest of the bills paid and ready for tomorrow’s Post.”

“Fine by me,” I said, taking the chance to stretch my back, already thinking of plopping into bed as soon as humanly possible. “Thank you for handling those, sweetheart.”

“’Course,” he said with feeling, rising and kissing my forehead. “How are ye feeling?”

“Pretty well, at the moment,” I said, pleasantly surprised, now that I thought about it. “Like death, this morning, but I haven’t vomited once since lunch!”

“Victory, indeed,” he grinned, kissing me, long and sweetly.

“MaMAAAA?” bellowed Bree, her voice bouncing ghoulishly around the bathroom walls. “Come’ on do insee’pyder, please!”

“I’m being summoned,” I murmured against his lips.

“Go,” he whispered. “Heaven forbid ‘insee’pyder’ have to wait.”

“Oh,” I called when I was halfway back down the corridor, “I think the electric bill came today. It’s on the counter by the phone with the rest of today’s mail.”

“Thank you, mo ghraidh,” he called back.

Tub filled, baby inserted, bubbles abundant, I knelt beside the tub and swirled my hands in the warm water. Bree beamed up at me, ready: “GO! Insee’pyder, Mama!”

“Alright,” I said dramatically, reaching for the green plastic sandbox bucket and scooping up water as I sang: “Theeeeeeee ITS-Y-bit-sy spiiiiider went UP the water spout ....”
I raised the bucket theatrically. “Down came the raaaaaain AND—”

The payload released on, “WASHED the spider out,” dousing Bree with warm, soapy water.

Fizzy giggles emerged through the waterfall pouring down her scrunch-up face as I sang on. “Out came the suuuuuun and dried up all the rain, and the ITS-Y-bit-sy spiitiiider went UP the spout—?”

“—AGAIN!!!” Bree finished, knowing the drill and LOVING it.

We had just finished washing the shampoo-spider from her hair and ANOTHER rendition was demanded, when Jamie’s voice came from the doorway. “Sassenach?”

“Yes, darling?” I said absently, reaching for the bar of soap Bree had just knocked into the water.

“What is the ‘selective service?’”

My blood froze absolutely cold. I whirled on my knees to gape at him, praying that it was a newspaper clipping in his hand, or one of his library books, or—

But it was a letter bearing the words ‘Department of Defense’ across the top. The truth was written on his face, the tightness of his voice, the rigid set of his jaw. “Tis the forced conscription for the war in the east, aye?”

“Jamie—” I staggered to my feet, praying in blind panic. Please, God, no. “Jamie—Please tell me—you haven’t been—?”

“To Mr. James Fraser,” he read,

“According to our records, you have not yet registered with the Selective Service, as is required of all permanent residents of the United States.

Please report no later than December 15th, 1950 to the enlistment station named below for registration, or risk revocation of your residency status with the Department of Immigration.

Sincerely…”

Jamie trailed off, his face a mask of control I hadn’t seen in many years. The sight terrified me to my core—his face of duty, of danger, of great burdens to be borne.

My hands were shaking as I reached for the letter, as I scanned it wildly for some salvation. “But you’re—you’re not even a citizen! They can’t just force you to go off and fight in their wars!”

“Apparently they can,” he said stiffly. “All permanent residents, it says.”

“Jesus…” There was no way out. “Jesus—fucking—”

“FUN-KING!” Bree squeaked from the tub, sounding immensely pleased. Normally, that would have incited riotous laughter, then stern admonishment and promises between Jamie and I to guard our words more carefully. But we barely noticed.

My blood pounded so loudly in my ears I could barely hear myself blurtting, “We could go to Canada.”

He cocked his head in question. “They dinna fight wars there?”
I gave a jerking shrug. “They don’t usually start them, at least.”

“That’s the coward’s way,” he whispered, his face still stone. “I canna just run.”

“And why not?” I demanded, my voice treacherously close to both tears and shouting.

“Why can I no’ take the coward’s way?” The mask wavered, showing his scorn. “Christ, Claire, do ye no’ ken me at all?”

“And do YOU not know me?” I shouted. “Do you not have the faintest idea what it DID to me to —” It took only the cracking of my voice for the panic to overtake me completely in wracking sobs as my hands went feral. “ — to let you go to your death? For a cause you—shouldn’t even have been dragged into in the first place?? I w—” I choked. I was mere inches from his face, but I could barely see him through the tears. I wrenched a breath from my throat. “—WON’T, do it— again— do you — hear m—?”

Jamie suddenly snatched me hard against him, his voice a cracked moan of despair through his own sobs. “I know, mo chridhe… I know….”

I buried my face in his chest, and could only croak, “Jamie—”

He tried to say something, but couldn’t get a word out.

We clung to one another with every ounce of strength, swaying and weeping for a long time, until —

“I’m scairt of this, Sassenach.”

His breath was hot and gasping in my hair. “God, I—dinna want any part of it…. The thought of leaving ye… the—” He let out a sob, and I could feel his tears against my temple, the resonance of his words in my chest. “—Christ, the bairns—”

He buried his face in my shoulder. “I’m so scairt, Claire.”

“What’s you scairt, Daddy?”

We turned to see Bree standing in the tub, still naked as you please, looking up, stricken.

With a small sound that broke my heart, Jamie released me and crossed to the tub. He lifted his daughter up into his arms and pressed her against his chest, not seeming to notice that his shirt was instantly soaked.

“Daddy? What’s you scairt?” she repeated.

I had to clamp my hand over my mouth. He clutched her tighter, rocking her, focusing his entire being on love of her.

“Use-r words, Daddy.”

Despite everything, he choked out a laugh at that.

“I’m scairt,” he answered hoarsely after a moment, “of having to leave you and Mama, a chuisle.”

“Oh…”

I came and wrapped my arms around them both, trying so very hard not to slip into panic. This—this was my home, these three people I held— That it might be ripped from—
“Dinna leave though’kay?” Bree demanded, glaring sternly at him. “Okayyy, Daddy?”

“Okay?” I seconded in a feeble whisper.

He let out another weak, broken laugh and leaned down to kiss us both. I could feel his chest shuddering with the sobs he was suppressing.

The words were in Gaelic, breathtakingly quiet, and he repeated them over and over.

"I won’t…I won’t.”

When he drew back a long, long time later, his eyes were dry. “Now,” he said, kissing Bree and wrapping a towel around her shivering back, “let’s get ye ready for bed, wee cub. Which storybook shall we have, tonight?”

[JF]

Jamie resolved never to let Claire or Brianna see his fear of this ever again.

“I’ll go tomorrow to register my name,” he said firmly to Claire as he held her in their bed that night, “but it willna come to anything, Sassenach.” There are millions of folk they’ll call up before me.”

“You don’t —”

“Dinna fash, mo nighean donn,” he crooned, kissing and soothing away her fears. “I’m staying right here—We’ll no’ be parted—I’m right here—”

But he lay awake far into the night and most nights to follow, praying with all his soul.

Please, God….

Please….

Dinna take me from them.

Please….

Please…..

Chapter End Notes

From the prompts:

@dlouise2016 said: This may not be appropriate for FMM but in response to your request for Jamie “firsts” & since he is only about 27-28, there was a military draft going on at the time for the Cold War & the Korean War. Since Jamie was certainly a warrior, he must have some strong feelings about war & Claire definitely would with her WWII experience

@chechzooo suggested: Staying out of the draft
December, 1950

“C L A I R E !!!”

My heart exploded in instant terror and I whirled from the array of clipboards at the nurses’ station to see Jamie barreling down the hospital corridor toward me—which at 11:00 on a Wednesday—his face red and wrenched—was—

Whatever had been in my hands clattered to the floor and I bolted toward him at full speed. “Jamie!” I shouted, heart racing, not bloody caring that we were in a hospital with dozens of people watching. “Are you hurt?? Bree—??”

“No’ hurt—All fine—” he had time enough to say before catching me up into his arms so violently it knocked the wind out of me.

He was clasping me so tightly I couldn’t get a look at his face but I could clearly hear that he was crying; and Jesus, the fabric heaving under my cheek wasn’t the plaid shirt in which he’d left the house, this morning, but his best grey suit. “JAMIE,” I rasped out, his emotion bringing forth my own tears before I even knew what they were for, “what on EARTH is—?”

He was saying something over and over as his hands traveled over me, alternately touching and holding, but—

“English, Jamie—” I begged, “English!”

“I dinna have to go—Dinna have to go—”

“Go? Go where??”

“The war—Claire, I’ve been EXEMPTED.”

I pushed back against him hard enough to break his grip, staggered back far enough that I could look up into his face. There were tears in his eyes, yes, but he was beaming with joy and RELIEF.

This flickered for a moment with something like pain as he took my face between his hands. “They did call me up, mo ghraidh. I got the letter day before yesterday.”

“Wh—WHAT—?” I was instantly sobbing, the world exploding around me as I tried to grasp hold of his words.

“But I dinna have to go—and I willna ever have to go.” He kissed me, fiercely, and made me meet his blazingly joyous gaze. “Sassenach—mo chridhe—I’m FREE.”

Earlier that day

“You’re a jumpy son of a bitch, aren’t you?” the medical officer said, wiping blood from his lip as he picked himself off the floor.

“I—beg your forgiveness, sir—Major—” Jamie stammered even as he seethed, cursing himself, DAMNING himself and his instincts. Christ, surely this sealed his fate, if nothing else.
He was still clad in the green paper gown, standing—only his straight back prevented it being called ‘cowering’—in the corner of the tiny room, fists clenched and shaking, trying desperately to remain still and calm, but his heart and memory screaming, images flashing before his eyes.

“You pack a wicked hard punch. Never had a prostate exam before, huh?” Shockingly, the man had a wry smile on his face as he turned to the papers on his counter. “I did warn you, right after I asked you to turn around, you know.”

“Aye, well, I didna—"

*Didna ken what in God’s name a Prostate was, let alone where it would be located.*

He choked back a snarl. “No, I’ve never had one.”

*And what I HAVE had screams at me to cut your throat, should you come near me again.*

But he forced himself to unclench his fists and say, with an approximation of calm, “That was—inexcusable—I—shall make whatever reparations—”

The Major waved his hand and turned. “Don’t worry about it.”

Jamie blinked. “Sir—I drew blood from ye—Surely I—”

“I said, don’t worry about it,” the man said firmly, taking a drag on his cigarette before making a note on his paper, “we’re done with the physical, anyway.”

*Why a medical man should see fit to smoke was beyond him—but whatever failings the Major might have, it was more than gracious of him to look past being punched in the face and knocked to the ground in the course of his duties.*

“You can get dressed,” the Major said, “Then and come join me in the office across the hall when you’re ready.”

Jamie didn’t move a fraction from the safety of the corner until the door had closed firmly behind the officer. He exhaled all his heart, it seemed, as he staggered to lean against the examination table. He felt the panic rising, but he bit it back. Not today. Not now.

He’d gotten the summons letter barely three weeks after presenting himself to register, unheard of, by all accounts. Thank God he’d been alone in the house at the time, for he screamed and wept and prayed, BEGGED, with all his soul.

He’d asked Charlie MacAlister out for a dram, to ascertain quietly from a friend how the thing was done. He greatly respected all the Fernacre lads, but didn’t trust that whisperings of his inquiry wouldn’t make their way back to Claire through Tom, by way of Marian. He’d been out with Charlie several times since Samhain (though plans for a family get-together had been repeatedly foiled by holidays, weather, and the ebb and flow of Claire’s health with the bairn). Charlie, he could speak to, man to man—outsider to outsider, even—without fear… at least, not fear of rousing Claire’s suspicion.

No, you weren’t obliged to go off to war immediately, Charlie said, just report for your medical examination. Then, you’d have some time—sometimes weeks, sometimes months—to put your affairs in order and say your farewells. You’d be trained, for a time, in the weapons and ways that would be needed, and then you’d be sent to the front for months or years. Jamie knew from the book he’d pored over that Korea was half a world away. From the newspapers he’d read every day, but now was seeing with new eyes, he knew that after a year or two of lean recruiting, 1950 had already
seen more than a two thousand percent increase (two THOUSAND percent!!) in the number of men called up for the draft over 1949, the faraway war growing more and more deadly, consuming men like an inferno. The men being called to war now, Charlie said bleakly, would be coming back only after their deployment term ended, if they were wounded, or....

He couldn’t tell Claire. If it made him a coward, then he would carry that mark, but he couldn’t face his wife, tell her their lives were once again going to be upended by war—and this time, a war for which he was utterly untrained and unequipped, fodder for whatever weapons were used to wage it; couldn’t face her or bear to touch her belly, where grew yet another of his children to be born without their father. He was a coward, but if he had had to look her in the eye and tell her, he couldn’t have gotten out the door. He’d have taken her to bed and made love to her and wept and made love to her again and again until the United States Armed Forces dragged him from the house with their own hands. And so, he’d kissed his wife and daughter that morning, gotten into the Car with his best Suit in the back seat, and driven to the enlistment station.

It was massive, the Boston Military Entrance Processing Station, ominous and sleek and echoing all around with booted footsteps. Posters screamed out from every wall, bills alternately coaxing, shaming, or flattering young men into joining the Armed Forces voluntarily—though it seemed an infuriatingly moot point, given that the voice over the Loudspeaker cheerily reminded him that now he’d passed through ‘Freedom’s Front Door’, his military career had already begun.

The uniformity of it all was perhaps the most chilling of all: everything in sight, from the desks in each office to the last badge on the last soldier’s uniform were identical in form and usage. War, he understood; bloodshed, he knew to his core; the need to defend and protect, aye; but this....pageantry? He’d seen it only in the English army of his own time—and he had cause to know what acts of base treachery could be perpetrated behind such order. And perhaps it was that knowledge that had sent his fist into the Major’s face on instinct, and what reminded him that he’d do it again, to prevent being another officer’s prey.

And it was for that reason as well as the draft that Jamie’s heart was screaming as he dressed and crossed the hall into the Major’s office. Major Dr. Mark Barrington, M.D. (for so the handsome nameplate read) gave him a nod of acknowledgement, but continued scribbling on the page before him. Jamie took a seat in the chair across the wide desk and clutched his hat in his hands.

A full minute passed.

“When am I to report, then?” Jamie blurted, when he could bear it no longer. Major Barrington looked up, having the gall to look bemused. “So that I might begin preparing.”

“Just hold your horses. We’re done with the physical, but still have to go through some things,” the Major said, pulling Jamie’s medical folder to the top of his pile and examining it. “So: wicked scars on your back….nasty gash on your leg…busted-up hand….blow to the back of the head…..More cuts and burns and scars than I can count…Other—trauma,” he said carefully before looking up at Jamie over his spectacles. “You’ve been to hell, haven’t you, Fraser?”

Jamie’s mouth tightened and he said stiffly. “I did what needed doing, when the need arose.”

Major Barrington nodded. He was quiet for a moment, then said in quite a gentle voice, “Bataan?”

The word had absolutely no meaning to Jamie.

“Or Palawan? Changi?”

The look on the man’s face was one of understanding, so Jamie gambled his chances, tightened his
mouth, and gave a small shrug. “Something of the like.”

“Got some scars off the Japs myself,” he said gruffly. “You’re lucky to have made it back alive.”

“Aye, thanks be to God,” Jamie said, with feeling. Of course: parts of Claire’s war had been fought against the Japanese, he remembered. That fit well enough with his ambiguous narrative of capture in the line of duty and long captivity.

The Major flipped through more pages in Jamie’s file. “Why is there no record of your past service, here?”

“It’s—complicated.”

“Might be worth working through ‘complicated,’” Major Barrington said, frankly. “If you had documentation that you fought in the last war, you could possibly get an exemption on those grounds.”

*Christ, if only Frank Randall could work another miracle.*

“I’m not sure Britain would claim me,” Jamie said carefully. “I was captured, see, and they seem inclined to—pretend I never existed, rather than acknowledge they left me behind.”

“Bastards,” Barrington said, with such venom Jamie looked up. “It’s the least they could fucking do.”

Jamie felt oddly touched. But all he could do was shrug stiffly and utter a solemn, “Such is my lot.”

Major Barrington stared at Jamie for a long moment. Then, nodded decisively, and resumed his writing on the same page on which he’d been working when Jamie walked in.

Jamie closed his eyes and thought of Claire—of how she smiled when she looked at Brianna—how her eyes lit up when she was talking of some gruesome oddity from the hospital—how she—

“Well, it’s a damn shame,” the Major said suddenly, turning the page over and continuing his efficient script.

“Erm…What’s a shame, Major?”

“You excelled in your stamina and strength tests. Vision’s perfect. You’re just about the hugest fucker I’ve ever seen in the flesh, and based on that punch you landed me, I bet you could take out the commies singlehanded,” he said with a laugh, “but that hand is a dealbreaker. A rightie needs a sound hand to operate standard-issue guns.”

Jamie’s mouth was like sand as he rasped out, “Rightie?”

The Major slid the page across the desk, along with a pen. “Sign here, Mr. Fraser, and you’re off the hook for good.”

Jamie scanned it wildly. *James A. M. M. Fraser….Classification 4-F….Registrant not acceptable for military service.*

Jamie was screaming inside with dawning hope and relief, but—

*Forgive me, Claire.*

“I canna in honor withhold, Major Barrington, that I am left-handed. The injury to my right willna
prevent me from operating a mus—Rifle. And I received that blow long ago. I’ve fought with it many a time since.”

The Major looked up from the document, his eyebrows drawn. “I say you’re right-handed. So, you’re right-handed.”

Jamie could only gape, absolutely dumbstruck.

Barrington rolled his eyes and gave an exasperated wave of the hand. “Do you WANT to go to Korea?”

“No!” Jamie said at once, the vehemence making the Major sit back ever-so-slightly. “No,” he said more calmly. “Not at all—I’ve a family: a wife, a daughter, and another babe on the way. But I’m no’ a man to evade his duty. Aye, I’ve a great wish to be free of war, but none so great as to act so dishonorably.”

The Major actually smiled. “If it weren’t for the accent, I’d be convinced you were Captain fucking America himself.”

Before Jamie could even begin to ask who in God’s name that was, Barrington stood to attention, and Jamie, bewildered, followed suit. “If there’s any dishonor here,” the Major met Jamie’s eye, direct, man to man, “let it fall on me, hear?”

“Major…I canna—”

“You CAN. You’ve had your war, Fraser. Go enjoy your peace.” He pushed forward the pen once more. “Now sign on the goddamn line before I change my mind.”
Chapter Notes

Not a chapter, just a chance to share some incredible art that has been created for Flood my Mornings over on Tumblr!

Flood my Mornings Wedding, watercolor gifted to me by @rachellbostick (rachellbostick.tumblr.com).

Bus Stop Sighting, gifted to me by @ofbrochtuarach (ofbrochtuarach.tumblr.com)

Flood my Mornings, (Outlander AU Commission, a gift from a friend!) by @jpaddey (jpaddey.tumblr.com) (instagram: jennapaddey)

IN SUMMARY, I HAVE THE BEST READERS OF ALL TIME!

You should be able to view the links without a Tumblr, but if you want to come join the fun please do! I run a drama free blog: just fic and gifs and talking about the books. Feel free to join us!
Sweet Souls

Just before Christmas, 1950

There was snow falling, outside in the night, but Claire was as warm as a wee coal under the blankets and even warmer between her legs. She had her work in the morning, an early shift, but her sleepy moan when he touched her was eager, wanting. She had just surpassed her eighth week, and with the worst of her Morning Sickness apparently on the wane, she had been far more eager for his touch these last few days. He would give her as much or little as she needed during her pregnancy, for he knew carrying a child was a fickle business.

But, Christ, he loved the ‘much.’

He had just pushed aside the blankets and begun trailing kisses down her (yes, visibly curved!) stomach, when—

“Daaaaa?”

Claire groaned, both in desire and exasperation. “Go back to sleep,” she pleaded through the closed door, urging him downward along his path by pushing on his crown.

Jamie was more than happy to oblige. He loved Brianna to distraction, but a man had to see to his wife above all, aye?

“Daaaaaaddyyyy?” Sharper, now, with just that note of wail.

“Just think,” he said against the tender skin of Claire’s thigh, “soon, there will be TWO of them.”

Claire’s curse about damned inconvenient little buggers was interrupted by another, “Daaaaaaaaaa-ddyyyyyyyy?” this one with a small sob that melted his heart.

He sighed and rested his cheek on her hip. Claire sighed, too, but relaxed, and ran her fingers through his hair affectionately, silent permission and understanding.

He kissed her belly, her hipbone, and then one tiny tantalizing nip between her thighs. “Later?”

“TEASE,” she laughed, groaning as she nudged him up on his way.

He pulled on his nightshirt as he walked, such that he didn’t quite hear what she said as he reached the door. “What was that, a nighean? Something I can get for ye?”

“I only said: you’re a wonderful father, Jamie.”

Brianna was out of bed in the darkened nursery, standing in her Pajamas just beside the door.

Jamie knelt and touched her cheek. “What is it, then, a leannan?”

“Da, ‘m scairt,” she whispered, trying to put her arms around his neck.

He put his arm around her but didn’t pick her up. “What is it you’re scairt of, lass?”

She scrabbled against him as she whimpered on the verge of tears. “Dat biggerl-bed.”
Jamie had to purse his lips and hug her close to keep her from seeing him laughing.

Much to-do had been made about Brianna’s “Big Girl Bed.” Her high-sided crib was still in the room, pushed to the side for when the new bairn came. Claire said they would turn the closet of their own bedroom into a place for the wean to sleep at first, only until he or she was old enough to bide through the night in the same room as Bree.

There had been some talk about whether their expanded family would require a larger house. Their home was perfect for the three of them, but it had only the two bedrooms, one bathroom, the kitchen, the living room, and the halls between. Yes, another room would be very useful, if only to have another spot to go for when the bairn needed to be changed or fed. As it was, Jamie suspected there would be many a late-night spent in the living room.

In the end, though, it was decided that since they’d more than likely be obliged to change places again when Claire should be accepted to medical school, it was best to make do with slightly inconvenient sleeping arrangements as best they could until then. Brianna’s new bed was the first step in that transition—and it was going off like wet kindling.

Jamie rubbed his daughter’s back with a gentle hand. “There’s naught to be scart of, cub,” he promised. “Remember how excited you’ve been about getting the new bed?”

“Scary, though,” she insisted, looking warily back over her shoulder.

“Come on, mo chridhe.” He picked her up and walked over to the bed.

She squirmed and tried to get away. “Chan eil! Don’—Dinna—don’na want to!”

Poor little love doesna ken which language is up.

He got her under the covers, in the end, with much soothing and gentle reassurances. Nonetheless, there were still tears sparkling in her huge blue eyes as she asked, pitifully, “Come’I sleep wif you’an Mama?”

“It’s a right good thing we got wee Fraser started when we did, else we’d never have managed wi’ a two-year-old about.

“How about I’ll stay here wi’ you for a bit, instead?”

“Okay!” she said eagerly, scooting in toward the wall to give him room. “NO, Daddy: UNDER-cubbers.”

Jamie’s mouth twitched as he obeyed and settled in… UNDER the covers.

She turned onto her side, facing him with excitement at this treat. “Ree’me’book, Daddy?”

“No, lass, we need to keep the light off to help us both sleep. But shall I tell ye a story?” She gave a happy eeee! of excitement. “Who do ye want to hear about tonight? How about Grannie Ellen?”

“Who’s ‘at?” she asked at once, as she always did.

He laughed as he faced her, settling in onto his side. “Ye ken fine who she is.” In the dim moonlight, he could see her grin. She liked to make him start from the beginning.

“Grannie Ellen was Da’s mother, and long ago, I was her wee bairn, only a little bigger than you.”

She giggled at this outlandish concept. Jamie thought for a long moment which story to tell before
deciding.

“I was the youngest of the weans and ye might think that would mean I needed the most tending, but Uncle William and Auntie Jenny liked to squabble and cause trouble, and Grannie Ellen always seemed to be up to her ears in dealing wi’ their troublemaking. But one day, I remember Mam filled a haversack, picked me up, and said, ‘Come on, wee Jamie, let’s the two of us go adventuring, aye?’”

“What’s ‘at?”

“Adventuring? It means…going on a long walk through the mountains.”

“Can WE have it’venture?”

“‘Course we can. But not tonight, aye?”

“Oh, aye,” she conceded, in a manner so Scottish it made him ache for his homeland; for her to know it, too.

He cleared his throat. “Anyhow, Mam walked us far, far, far from our house, and we picked fruit and ate it wi’ the bread and cheese that she’d brought.”

“I like cheese,” she piped eagerly in Gaelic, and it was only then that he realized he HAD slipped into his native tongue.

“Me too, sweetheart,” he replied, loving sharing these sounds with his child. Speaking Gaelic was still an exciting challenge for her, though, and so for the sake of everyone’s sleep, he reverted to English for the rest of the story. He took up a slow, gentle pattern of rubbing her back, his usual way of coaxing her toward dreams.

“We must have been talking of Jenny and Willie, for I remember—” He paused, startled by the vividness of the memory, though he could have been no more than four years of age at the time. “I asked her if I could have a wee brother of my own to play with.”

“Brum-therr,” Brianna repeated contemplatively, as though she’d never heard the word.

“Or sister, I wasna altogether picky, just wanted someone little of my own, since Jen and Willie had each other as a pair. But Mam said, Aye, maybe someday, mo chridhe, but that she would be sad not to have ME as her weemost bairn, and that—”

“Can we have one, Da?”

“Aye, lass, when the spring comes and the weather gets warm, we’ll go on an adventure, I pro—”

“Noooo, abBAIRNNN, Daddy.”

“Oh, well…” Jamie had stepped right into THAT one. He thought for a moment about just telling her—the cradle was there across the room; but he knew Claire would wish them to share the news together. Another month or so, then, after the new year.

He hoped Ellen Fraser was grinning to hear him tell his own small child, her namesake: “Maybe someday, mo chridhe.”

“Okay, but now, though?”

“No,” he laughed, “not now.”
She nodded with decision. “I’m go’ get one.”

“Oh, aye? Where do ye think ye might find a wee brother or sister, cub?”

“Market,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“Well, ye should know that only Mamas and Daddies can get those. Just be patient for a time, aye?” She sighed dramatically. “D’ye want to hear about the rest of the adventure wi’ Grannie Ellen?”

“Oh, yeah!” she said, but gave a huge yawn as she began to get comfortable.

“Right, then….Well, I must have fallen asleep in Mam’s arms, for when I woke, the sun was just starting to set and she was whispering in my ear that I should look up. And there, up in the sky, was the largest flock o’ birds I’d ever seen.”

Bree was getting sleepier with every moment and her, “Ohhh,” was swallowed up in another yawn.

“I dinna ken what kind they were, but they took on all the colors of the sun as they dipped about. And there was one bird far away from the rest, lost. He kept circling about, like he couldna see the others, and I thought surely he was scart of being left behind….” Bree’s eyes closed. “….But then a whole great part of the flock broke off and flew back to encircle the wee one…. “ Jamie rolled gingerly onto his back to shift out from under the covers. “…and they all made their way back together to rejoin the rest.”

He was just about to sit up and tiptoe out, when Bree gave a sleepy moan and crawled atop his chest. He opened his mouth to tell her no, but then closed it again, and pulled the coverlet atop them both.

“And my mother said, ‘see all those sweet souls, Jamie? How happy they are, all together?’”

He felt Bree’s breathing drop into that slow, steady rhythm of sleep. He let his palm rest on the back of her head. “‘Souls need to have their family about them, be it the ones born to them or ones they found along the way,’ she said, ‘and so they’ll always find each other, no matter what.’”

And in a life marked by much tragedy, that knowledge had always been joy.
December 25, 1950

‘Children laughing, people passing’

Laughing. That’s what one expects to hear from children on Christmas morning.

Not a BLOODCURDLING SCREAM.

Jamie and I went from dead-sleep to complete and utter panic in a single heartbeat, and staggered blindly to her room to find it empty. After a frantic ten seconds, we found her in the doorway to the living room, shrieking in delight at the Christmas tree by the fire.

I groaned in relief and clutched my belly, panting, but Jamie was faster to action. “Brianna Ellen Fraser!” His whole body electric with adrenaline, he snatched her up off the ground and made her look him in the eye. “You’re NOT to prowl around the house wi’out your mother or me, d’ye hear me? Ye stay in your room until we fetch ye.” He gave her a harmless but firm shake for emphasis. “D’ye hear?”

“But—but—Daddy, LOOK!” She contorted in his arms to loll her head back at the tinsel-clad tree. “CHRINSMINS!!!”

Jamie exhaled hugely and closed his eyes for a moment, as if forcing the fear and anger to exit his body. I rubbed his arm encouragingly and he made a small sound of acknowledgment before kissing Bree’s cheek. “Aye, Christmas, it is.” He set her back down on the floor and put his arm around my waist, the both of us looking down ruefully at our grey-hair-inducing progeny. “Ye like the tree, cub?”

“AYE!” Bree squealed emphatically, bouncing twice on the spot for joy before running over to examine it more closely.

Jamie and I had brought in the tree last night after she had gone to bed, making a happy, pajama-clad, fireside evening of getting the thing decorated as the snow gathered outside. We’d happily gorged ourselves on Mrs. Byrd’s iced gingerbread and guzzled apple cider as we festooned the branches with baubles and tinsel. Jamie, though he’d never before the 20th century heard of such a daft thing as bringing a live tree indoors and gaudying it up, seemed absolutely delighted by the overall effect—though in all honesty, it may have been the dollops of whisky he added to his cider. He kept on stepping back and proclaiming passionately, “s’BEAUTiful!”

A good portion of the tinsel ended up in our hair and clothing, for decorating inevitably turned into throwing and fits of helpless giggles; and, of course, icing was attack-smeared over faces as we laughed ourselves hoarse; and *naturally,* one thing led to another, AND we ended up on the ground, naked, covered in sticky sugar, and making sweet, sweet Christmas Eve love on the rug (an activity that doesn’t often make the carols and poems, that)(but pretty bloody festive, in my book).

Jamie’s squeezing my arse into oblivion (as though also remembering our celebrations last night) was more than a little distracting as we fondly watched Bree, swaying as she stared in rapture up at the tree. “S’all—” she made a vague, sweeping gesture with both arms, and hopped up and down, “—all —HAPPY!”

I gave Jamie a squeeze back, laughing. “The tree makes you feel happy, lovey?”
Bree glared at me, ever the toddler-pedant. “It IS happy, Mama, see? See it?”

“You’re so right, baby. It’s a very happy tree.”

A quarter of an hour later, with mugs of tea and plates of toast with cinnamon butter, Bing Cosby crooned out Christmas tunes from the record player while the rest of us sat on the floor by the fire to open gifts.

Bree went first, of course, and her gasp of delight was nearly as alarming as the one that had awoken us in terror. “Issa TRAINNNN!!” she squealed, pulling the wrapping paper loose with startling voracity.

All in all, I would wager Jamie had just as much fun setting the wooden train set up as Bree, and she was having a jolly good time. Seeing the pair of them laying on their stomachs, choo-choo-ing along and causing disastrous (and apparently hilarious) collisions was a special kind of joy.

I wrapped my hands around my mug and leaned back against the face of the sofa, feeling—something in my belly. Not movement—it was far too early for quickening, but that bit of foreign pressure…yes, that was there.

_I can’t wait to meet you, little one_, I said silently to my child. _Hurry up and join us, alright?_ And I could have sworn the pressure responded.

“Happy Christmas, Sassenach.” Jamie was handing me a lumpy parcel wrapped in brown paper.

“Oh, darling!” I cried in delight a moment later, wrapping what turned out to be a sumptuous plum-colored wool scarf around my neck, “this is gorgeous! Wherever did you get it?”

“Made it.”

“…You MADE it??”

“Oh, aye,” he shrugged, oh-so-casually.

I just bloody stared at him. “You….KNIT???”

“Aye…is it bad?” He was startled by the intensity of my shock and he looked both bewildered and slightly nervous.

“NO—not at ALL, but—” I ran my fingers over the fine, neat rows of stitches. “I just—don’t think I’ve ever known a man that knits!”

“No? All highland boys do. Something to keep the hands useful while tending sheep or the like. Or, when there’s down moments at the barn not occupied by the lassies,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. He grinned shyly. “Ye really like it?”

“I LOVE it,” I said, with complete sincerity. “Just you wait, all the girls at the hospital will be after you to make THEM one!”

“Well, I’ll do what I can,” he said amiably, and I could tell he was gratified.

“Lord, I feel foolish over your present now.” It was definitely NOT homemade.

He grinned. “I’m sure I’ll love it, mo nighean donn.”

He did love it, in fact. The look of glee in his eye as he thumbed through the full-color special edition
of Motor Trend (along with an indefinite subscription) made it clear just how much of a monster we’d created in letting Jamie get his hands on a car— Sorry, get his hands on BONNIE (Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ). See? A monster. He was vociferating passionately about one of the articles on new headlight trends for 1951, when both of our Parent Radar Senses pricked up. “Bree, what are ye doing, there, lass?”

Bree was walking purposefully toward the foyer, and said only, “Somethin’”

Jamie snorted with a laugh. “Ye dinna say!”

“Loveyyyy…. Tell Mum and Da what you’re doing, over there.”

She didn’t answer, intent on reaching under the buffet cabinet by the door to grab for something, something that turned out to be a mailing envelope.

“Why, you clever girl, spotting that!” I peered in vain to ascertain if it was a piece of incoming mail or outgoing. Regardless, it must have gotten pushed off the back of the cabinet by accident, and sat unseen for God knew how long. Hopefully it wasn’t an overdue bill or something urgent.

“Aye, good work, cub. Can ye bring it here?”

Pleased with her successful rescue mission, Bree skipped back to us and gave the letter to Jamie. He glanced at it for a minute, then grinned. “That’s a Christmas present for your Mama, a leannan.”

“Oh? Another one?”

“No’ one that was planned, but I think it’ll be a welcome one, all the same.”

“Heer’go, Mama,” Bree said, flinging it unceremoniously into my lap. Harvard University, the return address said.

“Could be very much NOT a present, you know,” I said, seizing up and feeling like I wanted to vomit from anxiety. “In admissions, small envelopes are usually bad news, not good.”

Jamie’s expression wavered a bit at that, but he gave a game sort of shrug. “Open it?”

I slit open the envelope with a fingernail. God, these old fuddy-duddy bastards surely rejected me for being a married woman. Thank God, I hadn’t known I was pregnant at the time, for that surely would have been an automatic, No thank you. This rejection would be—

   Accepted

It must have shown on my face, for Jamie was beaming from ear to ear as he crawled over to kiss me. “Well done, Sassenach!!”

“It does say accepted, right?” I handed him the letter. “My brain isn’t making it up?”

“Aye, there it is, right in black and white. ‘We are pleased to inform you that you have been ACCEPTED.’ Bree, lass, your mother’s going to be a doctor! That’s exciting, aye?”

“Yeah!!” Bree said, though she was mostly focused on her trains.

“More like I’m going to be a part-time organic chemistry and biology student,” I said, but practically bubbling over with relief. I’d been expecting that goddamn letter WEEKS ago! “Just the two
prerequisites, but…” BUT STILL!

“I’m so proud of ye, lass,” he said, beaming. “Happy, happy Christmas, mo ghradh.”
December 31, 1950

“Is it ridiculous that I’m feeling nervous as a girl on the first day of school?” I asked, smoothing my coat with one hand and squeezing Bree’s hand with the other as we waited in the tidy hallway outside the MacAlister’s door.

“You’ve no reason, lass,” Jamie assured me. I knew he wanted to put his arm around my back, but his hands were full of whisky bottles and Bree’s diaper bag. He did manage to lean in and kiss my cheek. “They’ll take to ye just fine.”

This particular get-together was long overdue. I’d been delighted to learn about Jamie’s serendipitous meeting with the Irish hurling group, and the subsequent connection with the lone Scot, Charlie MacAlister. Though Jamie had gone several times since to join the game or else get a drink one-on-one with Charlie (apparently a chap after Jamie’s own heart in many ways), the several times we had tried to schedule a family dinner since Halloween, the fates had always seen fit to intervene, with holidays, birthdays, morning sickness, et cetera, et cetera.

Fitting, though, that at long last, we should be spending this thoroughly Scottish holiday with a thoroughly Scottish (well, Gaelic, collectively) family.

The door opened with a bang and a roar of “A GOOD NEW YEAR TO YE!!”

Even in the first five seconds of our acquaintance, Charlie MacAlister gave me so strong a recollection of a MacKenzie clansman, I felt like I’d been jolted back into Castle Leoch itself. Jocular, irreverent, fiercely protective and loyal to a fault, those men had alternately vexed and delighted and protected and astounded me with their vigor and kindness and overall enthusiasm for living, in all its forms.

Perhaps that’s why it didn’t perturb me in the slightest that Jamie’s friend’s choice greeting was to lift me clear off my feet in a massive rib-crushing hug; and even though it was the first time I was laying eyes on the man, I couldn’t help but laugh and hug him back, brimming with warmth and affection at once. “Well, hello to you too!” I felt Jamie relax behind me: I’d given my permission, so he would not come to my rescue. I thought I could actually sense him grinning.

“I’m so glad to finally meet ye, Claire!” Charlie boomed as he set me back on the ground, taking me in. “From the way Jamie speaks of ye—” His eyes suddenly lit up and he whipped them up to Jamie with a grin. “Why, ye wicked wee dog, Fraser: ye didna say!!” He threw his head back and roared with, “Meal a naidheachd to ye both!” He straightened to give me a wink. “When are ye due, then, lass?”

“CHARLIE!!!” barked a red-haired woman behind him, his wife, Saoirse.

“What? It’s—” Charlie spluttered and made vague gestures between himself and my notably curved belly. “I’m only—”

“You’re only about making a fool of yourself, Charlie Mac. Keep your mouth shut, if you please?” She gave me an apologetic look that was nonetheless warm and kind. “Please be accepting BOTH our apologies for that great gowl over there.” After greeting Jamie, she turned and swatted her husband hard on the shoulder, her eyes blazing as she said between clenched teeth. “Have you no control over that tongue??”
“I do—and ye tend to *like* my control of it, lass…” and he bent her head back to kiss her thoroughly. She tried to push him away but she couldn’t resist laughing as his hands roamed and she relented and kissed him back.

God, *this*. *THIS* I’d missed—to see another couple who loved our same kind of irreverence and warmth and informality. Husbands and wives in these times—at least in post-war America—tended to err on the side of reserve in public, bordering on primness. Even Tom and Marian, as dear as they both were to us, weren’t free with public displays of affection toward each other. Jamie and I tended to act precisely the way we wished and damn whoever should judge us for it, but it was unbelievably refreshing to not be the only ones in the room who would not be scandalized by lewd jokes.

On top of that, “Pregnancy” was considered a rather rude word, in American culture at present. Considering the massive increase in childbearing after the war, this seemed an enormously ridiculous cultural hangup ("be fruitful and multiply, but pretend the penises and vaginas don’t exist"). Those *in the family way* —as I now found myself—were treated with a delicate, pointed kind of embarrassment, as if to say, ‘look what she’s been doing…Heavens, what if she actually enjoyed it??’

I was used to the taboo, of course, having experienced it with Bree, and seen it around me, since; but it was an unexpected kind of *relief* to have it be so singled out with such joy and goodwill by these new friends. In fact, I was grinning like a prize idiot as I assured them both, “It’s *quite* alright, *really.*” I felt a rush of joy and pride at finally being able to share our news. I felt Jamie’s hand resting on my back. “You’ve spotted it right: we *are* expecting!”

Charlie gave a crow of triumph “I *thought* you’d been a little shifty these last few months about ‘family’ and things happening next year! When will the wean be arriving, then??”

“Late July,” I said, “or it might be the first of August.”

Charlie stepped forward to clap both of us on the back, at which Saoirse looked absolutely mortified. I made a point of reassuring her when she leaned in to kiss me on the cheek and offer her own *comhghairdeas*.

Jamie accepted the hearty congratulations, grinning like a fool himself, “Let’s keep it between us, aye? We havena told Brianna yet.” He nodded at the children, who were already playing on the living room floor. “Perhaps talk in a wee code if it should come up?”

Saoirse nodded agreement. “Wee Nolan has ears like a hare and a mouth like a magpie.” She gave a pointed roll of the eyes. “Wonder who he could *possibly* be getting it from…?”

It had all the same modern conveniences as our own house, the MacAlister’s little flat, but something about it—the spices, maybe?—or—no, that wasn’t it….Something about it just *felt* like Scotland. Like home.

If nothing else, I could see it in Jamie’s posture and manner. As for my own country of birth, I had rarely felt any great attachment to England that went beyond good tea and rolling hills. *Home* had been wherever I laid my head that night, and between Uncle Lamb, the war, and my experiences in the eighteenth century, I’d certainly spent more of my life amongst strangers than my own proper countrymen. But Jamie *was* Scotland, through and through, and even this small taste of it—*Americanized and quasi-Irish as it might be*—was enough to make him glow with an ease that filled my own heart in the seeing. He was happy with our life in Boston, I knew; blissful, even! To have our family together and safe was all he desired; but something about experiencing that deeper
home-ness again was a restorative to his soul, and I thanked God for putting Charlie Mac in Jamie’s path. It was pure delight to see the two of them going on in rapid Gaelic, like brothers.

“They’re like two pups together, aren’t they?” Saoirse said fondly, echoing my silent thoughts as she took a seat beside me on the sofa.

“Indeed they are,” I laughed, looking at them through the dining room doorway.

Saoirse was as red-haired as Jamie, freckled and cheery-eyed. “Will you be speakin’ the Ghana’d yourself, Claire?”

“Very little,” I attempted in that language, my accent horrendous but the words correct, I was fairly certain.

“Very well done,” she replied, laughing before switching back to English, her Irish accent broad and unashamed. “That’s about as much as I know of it, myself. My parents weren’t too keen on my marrying a Scot, but I’ve no regrets. Except maybe Charlie’s tendency to put his fool foot in his fool mouth.”

“It’s rather endearing, actually,” I assured her.

Despite herself, Saoirse grinned. “Damn me if it wasn’t one of the things that had me head-over-heels for the idiot.”

We laughed and settled deeper into the comfy couch, covered over with homey afghans. “So, Charlie tells me you and Jamie met in Scotland, originally? Did ye like it, there?”

“I did!” I paused just for a moment. “Well, to tell it true, a lot of sad things happened there…but we had some of our happiest days, as well,” I added, thinking of those days at Lallybroch before the war.

“Do you think you’ll ever go back?”

I thought about that for a long while. “To visit, certainly. When Brianna and—” I gestured to the baby, “are old enough to see and hear the stories, I think.”

“You’d never think of moving back permanently? Seems to be a dream of Charlie’s—it’d surprise me if Jamie had no similar desire.”

We had indeed talked about it, and I knew Jamie’s very conflicted thoughts on the matter. “Part of him wishes for Scotland, yes—but it’s a Scotland that’s long-gone.”

That surprised her. “How so?”

“Jamie had…a lot of hard things happen to him there. He lost his family, and so doesn’t have anyone left.”

“Not a soul?”

“No one,” I said, feeling the ache of it. I rubbed the baby absently. “So, he misses it, the land and its people and ways, but there isn’t anyone left in Scotland to make it home for him.”

“That’s very sad,” Saoirse murmured, sparing a glance toward the men in the dining room.

“It is. But you see, it’s easier to have our life in America: to keep Scotland in his mind the way it was, rather than feel the ache of it, seeing always what’s missing.”
“Aye, I understand….At least he has his lady—and his little ones.”

We shared a smile, and I wanted to ask her more about her own family, but just then the children descended, Bree, four-year-old Nolan, and little Will, just barely walking. No impromptu migration, this: the pack of them squealed in, chased by their fathers at their heels.

“You lot are no better than the children!” I laughed.

“Aye, maybe no’,” Jamie agreed, grinning, “But at least we’re old enough to drink, and they’re not.”

“I AM!” Nolan insisted. “I’m plenty grow’d up!”

“Oh, aye, to be sure,” Charlie said with a wink. “I forgot we had a grown wee mannie in our midst.” He went to the kitchen and returned with an armful of ginger ale bottles. “A man needs a stiff drink.” He cracked open a lid and handed the glass bottle to his son, who looked terribly important at acknowledgment of his maturity.

Bree was NOT intending to be overlooked. She put on her hips and insisted, “I’M mannie, TOO!” daring Charlie to say otherwise.

Nor did he, bless him. He already had a bottle ready for her. “Here ye go, wee mannie.”

Bree had never had soda pop before, and she recoiled in surprise at first taste of the bubbly treat, looking as thought she’d rather skip this novelty; but, a true Fraser, she would never admit defeat with Nolan so proudly enjoying his, and so she gamely drank, getting violent hiccups almost instantly.

“A Hogmanay toast?” Saoirse suggested, rising to her feet to pour some whisky. She offered one to me, but I accepted only a ginger ale. Many people drank alcohol regularly during pregnancy, I knew (as had I, in the past) but somehow now it made me feel ill to think of accidentally intoxicating the poor thing.

The toasts flew thick and fast. To our families! To the new year! To a better season on the pitch! To the whisky! And even—

“To our Bonnie Prince!” Charlie said, with an eye to Jamie, making a rude gesture toward the ceiling. “May he sleep wi’ spiders in his grave for the feckless wanker he was.”

“AAA-bloody-MEN!” I intoned with feeling.

“Aye,” Jamie said with a rueful nod as he drank, though he crossed himself.

He promptly choked as Bree squeaked out, “Whatssa WANE-gr?”

Before the rest of us could react, Nolan grinned fiendishly and started in with, “That’s QUITE enough from you, a blalaich,” Saoirse said sharply. “And what would Great-Gran Murray say if she heard ye were knowing such a word??”

I shook with silent laughter along with Charlie, such that I almost didn’t hear Jamie’s quiet question:

“…Murray?”

My belly tightened and I whipped my eyes up to look at him. He’d schooled his face into a mask of control—a sure bellwether of the deep emotional turmoil within him.
“My mother’s mam. They live together in Cambridge,” Charlie said blithely as he poured more whiskey all around. “The MacAlisters were none too pleased about my Da’s choice, but even they had to admit in the end what a fine woman she was. Strong and certain and wi’ a mouth on her that could wither fruit. Not one to charm royalty, she, but a damn formidable sort, Murrays.”

**Formidable. Like Jenny.**

“From, erm, which part of Scotland, is your mother’s family?” I asked casually.

“Roundabout Inverness, mostly.”

My heart quickened with excitement. Not far at all from Broch Morda. I was opening my mouth to ask more questions, to narrow and ascertain, but then I caught Jamie’s eye, his ever-so-slight shake of the head. I closed my mouth.

Later, after supper, while Charlie and Saoirse cleared the table (refusing our many offers of help), Jamie and I took the children into the sitting room again.

I took Jamie’s hand. “Why not, my love?” I asked gently.

He knew what I meant, but he didn’t answer right away, nor did he look me in the eye. He pulled me close and pressed a kiss to my cheek.

“Does it—” I began tentatively, but he was already speaking.

“Tis enough to me,” he said, simply, “that they might be.”

And though it at first struck me as utterly ridiculous, not to wish to know for certain, I did come to understand what he meant, as the evening went on. To KNOW was so final. Jenny and Ian certainly had THOUSANDS of descendants, and even so, the chances that we’d encountered someone from their direct line was highly unlikely, or at the very least, very difficult to prove. To allow himself to believe—that was the gift, here.

And I could see it in his eyes, the soft contemplation of it, the sense of true brotherhood between he and Charlie now even deeper. The tenderness that radiated out from his face as he knelt to speak to little Will about a toy. I could almost see the thoughts rolling through him.

*Might some scrap of this lad owe itself to Ian?*

*To Jenny?*

*To Ellen of Leoch or Black Brian Fraser?*

*Aye…it might.*

__________________

“Bree, a leannan, do ye want to come sit wi’ Da?”

“No,” she said, shrugging back and rubbing her face, “I wan’ Mama.”

“Fair enough,” he laughed. “I would want your Mama, too.”

“Come here, baby,” I beckoned, groaning a bit as I gathered her up against my chest. “Oof, there’s my sweet girl.” I savored the feeling, as I always did, of holding Bree in my arms and the baby in my
body. The sounds around us were muffled and distant as we settled into a warm heap of love.

The radio was switched on at 10:00, detailing the new year’s celebrations happening around the country. We’d arrived late in the evening, with the little ones having taken naps late in the day to stave off sleepiness, but the late hour was still wearing on them. Hot chocolate and slices of Black Bun cake at 11:00 were enough to rouse them temporarily, but it still took a great deal to get them all conscious for the big moment as we all got to our feet for the final seconds of 1950.

5…4…3…2…1!!!!

And as it always did, *Auld lang syne* began to play. It meant absolutely nothing to Jamie, of course. He had predated Robert Burns and his lyrics, and couldn’t have discerned the tune in any case, but he listened to the words with eager interest. Charlie was drowning out the radio with the traditional scots rendition, though I only knew the same anglicized version that was playing.

*Should old acquaintance be forgot,*

*and never brought to mind?*

*Should old acquaintance be forgot,*

*and auld lang syne?*

And for the first time in my life, with my children held close and Jamie’s arm around my back, the song gave me chills:

*We two have run about the slopes,*

*and picked the daisies fine;*

*But we’ve wandered many a weary foot*

*since auld lang syne.*

*We two have paddled in the stream,*

*from morning sun till dine*

*But seas between us broad have roared*

*since auld lang syne.*

And both of us had tears running down our faces as we locked eyes. No, we wouldn’t ever forget the things of our past: neither the *daisies* of our life, nor the *weary feet* from the trampings of war, nor the *roaring seas* of tragedy that had indeed once swept us apart.

*And there’s a hand my trusty friend!*

*And give me a hand o’ thine!*

*And we’ll take a cup of kindness yet,*

*for auld lang syne.*
And as we moved toward the front door for the first-footing, I kissed my trusty friend, and didn’t need to see any dark stranger outside to know that 1951 would be the best year of our lives.
And tell me that you love me

Chapter Summary

Tumblr request: For the next FMM I would love some J and C alone time :)

NSFW

January, 1951

He was on a beach. Aye, he was, daft as that seemed.

And laying on his back.

And naked.

Nor did he need to open his eyes to ken that fact. The wind was whipping across him, icy and sharp in itself, and peppering his skin with a spray of sand, forbye.

He couldn’t move arms or legs, some force weighting him to the freezing sand—and the tide was coming in, fast.

He braced himself for the shock, for the frozen wall of—

But the onrush of water over his feet and legs was warm, and he groaned with the relief and pleasure of it. Nor was it just warm compared to the frigid air: each swell was as as hot and comforting as bathwater, and seemed to seep right into his bones.

The waves came in faster and higher, crashing over him…

… then pulling back and out….

…and over him…and back…

… each sinking him deeper, deeper into the sand…

…a rhythm of heat and cold, and blissful heat again, all over his body, over,

and over,

and over…

…and Jamie came slowly to the surface to find that the frozen beach was his bed….

…..and the steaming waves of heat were Claire’s mouth between his legs.

Her hand slid upward to tease the sensitive skin around his nipples and he moaned for her, spreading his legs wide in a question that she answered at once, taking him deep, deep into her mouth.

His head was limp on the pillow but he watched her, the dark shapes of her hair spangled with moonlight, lapping forward like the sea foam, slow and regular and sure. He said her name, his
tongue feeling slow and feckless compared to what she was doing with hers.

Her hand suddenly slid back downward to do something that had him fisting both hands hard in her
hair, arching his back and making her moan around him as he pushed deeper. The light sparked
behind his eyes as he moved in tandem with her, her scalp hot, its rhythm urgent under his
demanding hands. A Dhia, she could have had him right then— but he wasn’t ready to relent just
yet. “Come here,” he growled, pulling her upward.

She moved to obey. He could see the gleam of her smooth, strong thighs as she moved toward him
and poised herself over—

“No,” he rasped, “come *here*”

“I—What?—” She laid a hand flat on his belly to steady herself. “Where do you want—”

He slid down and pulled her higher so she was practically on his chest.

*The sweet surprise in that faint, hoarse ‘...oh.’*

“Oh, aye,” he whispered back.

“You’ve never done it from that position before.” She sounded dazed.

“I suspect,” he murmured, threading his arms around her legs to tug her toward his mouth, “I shall
soon be apologizing…for the grievous oversight….”

A thrill of something dark and hungry in the way she looked down at him at him when she knelt on
either side of his head. He gave her that dark gleam right back when he sat up as far as he could,
kissing the sweet curve of her belly, slowly…*hearing the little sounds of need from her
throat...slowly... the urgency making her moan in earnest as he trailed his lips down....down....Her
sharp hiss as he casually laid his head back on the pillow, grinning up at her. *One of her thighs was
against his cheek—and he could feel it trembling. He kissed his way slowly up it, just able to see her
face above the curve of her belly; and as his tongue met the warm flesh of her, and the sound she
made—*

He skimmed his hands up and down her thighs, her arse, as he worked, feasting on every sigh, every
tightening of her legs, the way she cupped his head, the rise and fall of her as she responded to his
touch.

Christ, it must be good for her, this new way, for not a minute gone and—

“Ja—oh god—” she moaned, her breathing deep and ragged as her legs went taut and she bolted up
high onto her knees as though to get away. New position or not, he knew the ways of her body, and
knew that as as soon as he pulled her back down onto him—

The storm of her release crashed all around him, and it was as though her pleasure entered his body,
driving him with her need and satisfaction so that he felt those things—NEEDED them—as deeply
as he knew his own name. His arms wrapped tight around her hips, riding the rise and swell of her as
she sighed and shuddered, he felt as though he’d happily die there on that frozen beach, if this sea
spirit was to be condemned there with him, too.

“Aye,” he murmured a time later, when in a far less fanciful frame of mind, as she slumped against
the headboard above him and he caressed her belly, “I do humbly beg your pardon for never
thinking of that before.”
“You are— completely—forgiven.” An aftershock ran through her and she gasped, laughing a little. “Jesusbloodyfuckingchrist….”

“Mmmm, if I’ve got ye blaspheming, it must be good,” he purred, teasing with his fingers. “Shall we try that again?”

“Oh that is *definitely* getting added to the rotation.” She sighed hugely with released exertion, and made to clamber off him, then YELPED as he held her hips firm and dove back in. “Jamie!—didn’t mean NOW—” she half-laughed, half-whimpered, wriggling madly which only intensified the pressure of his efforts between her legs. She felt it, and the whimper became a groan. He felt her brace her hand behind her on his belly, her back arching in an inexorable swell of sensation. “Jamie—JamienonoJamienot again—I’m—”

He pulled back to look her in the eye. “D’ye really wish me t’stop?”

She looked down at him…then released a deep, shuddering breath that ended in a wicked grin. She snaked her hands down to hold his head in place, and moved forward, braced on her knees to—

*Didna think so*
“Mama?”

“Yes, lovey?” I said absently, absorbed in making careful notes on my genetics chapter for the evening.

“Come’s-yr belly’s all fat?”

My punnett square became a punnett scratch as I spluttered out a laugh. I turned from the rolltop, beaming through my mock indignation. “Are you calling your Mummy ‘fat’?”

“Oh huh!” Bree said from beside the desk as she eyed the item in question with a sort of reverent disgust. I turned toward the sofa to share a look with Jamie that was at first only a fond grin but then an identical, mutual question.

At just past fourteen weeks (in the second trimester at last!), I WAS sporting a very noticeable bump. We’d told Penelope and our work friends, drinking in the joy and congratulations, but we’d not managed to find the right way or time to explain it to our daughter.

My biggest worry was that Brianna might not yet be old enough to understand the concept of pregnancy in any real way. We’d talked about a number of possibilities by way of illustration. Jamie, for instance, had been in favor of having her think back to the time she met that pregnant horse back in October; but then, I’d objected, would she think there was a baby HORSE growing inside me?!

There was also the less nightmarish concern of sibling jealousy. Bree had been the indisputable center of adult attention her entire life, nor was she shy over speaking up when she found her audience’s devotion to be lacking. How might she react to the news that an unbidden interloper was soon to come and take a half-share of her spotlight?

“How come’s, Mama?” Bree demanded again, poking my belly with an insistent finger.

Jamie gave a game sort of shrug and a tentative, eager smile, which I gave him back as I felt the excitement of the impending newsflash.

“Come over here, sweetheart,” I bade her, walking over to sit beside Jamie on the sofa, muttering a rueful, “…fat, indeed…”

“Plump and sweet as a wee dumpling,” Jamie whispered with a grin, pulling me close and nuzzling kisses around my ear.

“What, Mama?” my little gymnast insisted, swinging both legs between my knees, braced on her hands.

“Well, sweetie…” I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. “My belly is bigger,” I said slowly, squeezing Jamie’s hand, “because there’s a baby growing
“Inside.”

She halted her swinging at once, stared at me blankly for a moment, then wrinkled up her face with an oh-so-eloquent, “Huh?”

Oh, boy.

“Remember how we talked about that you were once a tiny baby in Mum’s tummy?”

“Uh-huhhh….“

“Well…” I said, placing her hand against my belly, “now, there’s a new baby in Mum’s tummy.”

She looked from my face, to Jamie’s, to the belly, and back. “IN there?”

“That’s right!”

“But…” She scrunchered up her face in disbelief, “…why??”

Jamie and I both snorted a laugh, but Jamie came in for the assist. “Bree, a chuisle, it means you’re going to have a wee brother or sister.”

Her face changed in an instant. “For REALLY???”

“Aye, lass,” he laughed, “for really.”

She put both hands on her cheeks and whispered, “ohmygosh.” And after that, she just went pink and wordless.

I nudged her with my knee. “Well? Are you happy about the new baby, Bree?”

In answer, she clambered up between us and curled her arms around the bump in a clumsy hug.

“Ohhh, lovey-dove,” I half-laughed and half choked out, “that makes…that makes me the happy one.”

“Now, the bairn has to grow and sleep in Mama’s belly for a long time,” Jamie said suddenly, a few steps ahead and deftly preventing a possible meltdown, “but before your next birthday, God willing, we’ll have the new bairn wi’ us.”

“I c’n have your—my’birdday NOW, Daddy!” she offered enthusiastically, popping up her head with eyes wild with glee.

“Nay, mo chridhe. Your wee brother or sister is too small to be born, yet. We have to wait together for the proper time, aye?”

Bree nodded soberly and settled back against me, whispering, “Brumthersissser… stay’sleep, m’okay?”

We laughed, and I began to wipe away tears, absolutely blown away by Bree’s tenderness toward her promised sibling…until she glared up at us with a reproachful, spity SHHHHHHH. “Dinna wake ’um UP!”

Jamie curled his arms around us all and kissed Bree to soothe her ire. “Wouldna dream of it, wee cub. We’ll all be quiet so the bairnie can sleep.”
“Yeah, quiiiiet…” Bree whispered, sounding thrilled with her new responsibility as baby advocate.

Jamie laid his head on my shoulder, warm, and heavy and him. He squeezed me tight. I love you.

I felt moisture seep from my cheek into his hair as I leaned against him. I love you, too.
“Alright, now, Dr. Fraser…” Jamie prompted, poking her with his big toe as he read from the next card. “Tell me, what is the…. ‘Law of Segregation?’”

“Posits that allele pairs segregate randomly from each other during the production of gametes— allele pairs separate during gamete production and thus the sperm or egg carries just the one allele for each inherited trait—and when sperm and egg come together at fertilization—each contributes an allele, restoring the paired condition in any offspring.”

Finishing her slew of learn’ed gibberish in a triumphant rush, Claire bobbed her head once—quite like a musician that’s just hit the final note to their satisfaction— and looked over at him expectantly from her end of the sofa.

He studied the card and nodded sagely. “Aye, that’s verra good— Looks as though you’ve got that one down as well.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Aye, WELL,” he grinned, “that is to say, ye spoke a good number of words and verra confidently, forbye.”

“Lazy oaf,” she mock-scolded, snatching back the card to look over it herself. “A word or two off, but pretty damn close.”

“See? Confident.” And that’s verra impressive, lass.” He took the card back and re-read the definition silently to himself, shaking his head. “When ye explain the concepts to me, they make some sort of sense, but trying to read your books myself, the words seem as inscrutable as ancient Egyptian scripts.”

“They did finally translate those, you know,” she said absently as she flipped through her notes. “The Egyptian hieroglyphs.”

“Truly? How?” He grinned. “Did someone travel through your wee stones to get it sorted out?” He abruptly stopped grinning as he reflected that this was not, after all, so very outlandish a proposition.

“A stone of a different sort helped crack the code,” she explained, though her mouth was quirked up at the irony. "Uncle Lamb took me to see the Rosetta Stone at the British Museum, once, when I was young. Not much to look at for a seven-year-old, to be honest, but it opened up entire fields of study of ancient civilizations and their languages. Worth seeing in one’s lifetime, certainly.”

“That’s a wonder, and no mistake,” Jamie said, feeling truly awed that mankind since his own time had not only expanded the limits of new innovation, but had plumbed the mysteries of the ancient past as well; not to mention the deepest working of the invisible realms of blood and bone, exploring places smaller than any eye could see or imagine.

And in the many times these last weeks when he’d helped her with her studying, he’d often thought that perhaps the folk of Cranesmuir, the folk of Paris, even, hadn’t been so very wrong in naming his wife a witch, for she prophesied, and no mistake. For if the Laws that she’d recited and so patiently
tried to explain to him were to be taken as fact, she knew for fact that the child within her could never have brown, grey, or green eyes.

He pictured it like a great, pounding battlefield, the body of the wee babe—the Traits the warriors, armed and ready to make their stand for eternal glory. The Browns—they were the most vicious of the clans, the most ruthless and unyielding. Their steel was sure, and nearly always their opponents were vanquished by their mighty blows, or so cowed before the Donn brutes that they fled in terror before swords were raised....

And yet a courageous Gold and an unlikely Blue had defied the odds in the two battles before, each leading their clans through the fray in an almighty charge against the foe, and managed to raise their colors, to rout the Dominant forces. Thus triumphant, those legendary victors would not let their territory be ceded. Only one of *their* colors would fly over that hallowed field, and over their alliance. Only *future* marriages with Browns or half-Browns might see a change of banner in their descendants.

....but the Gold and the Blue were assured of their place in the songs. They would be remembered.

He hoped it wasn’t painful for the babe, to have such turmoil taking place in the deciding all the details of its formation. He scooted closer to Claire, close enough to cup the child in its sleeping-place. Dinna fash, wee one, he thought, all things will be well, soon.

One of Claire’s new terms flashed through his mind, and he decided to try it out, glad of the chance to test his bare scraps of understanding. “So, the ‘gamete’ is…like what you’d call our wee bairn, at present, aye?”

“Close—*gamete* is *before* the sperm—seed, I mean—and egg come together. Once they do, it’s called a *zygote,*” she said, rattling off the progression on her fingers, “*but just at present,* he or she is technically called a *foetus;* or ‘fetus,’ as I’m apparently going to have to start spelling it.”

Jamie banished the absurd — not to mention disturbing—image of a wee goat with human feet prancing about in there, and only laughed ruefully. “It’s a good thing it’s *you* becoming the physician, Sassenach. If it depended upon me to learn all this, we’d be ruined.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Jamie.” Her face was soft with a concern that warmed his heart. “Don’t think just because these terms are *new* to you, you couldn’t—”

“Dinna fash, Sassenach,” he assured her. “I ken I’m no’ a complete fool, and that I’m fully capable of learning whatsoever I wish….Same as I’m capable of climbing up the Mountain *Kill-A-Man-Giarro* ye told me of. It’s only a matter of how much I want to kill THIS man,” he pointed theatrically to the top of his head, “in the trying.”

“Forget medicine, you could have a career in comedy, if you wanted!” she hooted. He laughed along with her and pulled her feet up into his lap, gratified to hear her groan in relief as he removed her socks and began to rub. “Oh, darling, that’s wonderful — THANK you.” She let her head loll to the side against the back of the sofa. “You’ll put me right to sleep with that.”

“Well, and sleep, ye should,” he said, glancing up at the clock. “Ten o’clock and you’ve the examination in the morning.”

“Bright and early,” she confirmed through a yawn, wrapping her arm around the bairn. “But I’ve got to keep studying for at least a bit longer. I did well on the first exam, and I don’t want to get cocky and blow it.”
He raised one foot and placed a kiss on it, making her giggle. “You’re doing a magnificent job, mo chridhe—at all of it.”

He didn’t feel as though as if he were doing much of anything, compared with what she had to manage. She’d cut back to just two days per week at the hospital to allow for more time for her studies, but even so, a job, keeping up with Harvard’s demands, advancing pregnancy, and a two-year old together added up to an astounding level of demand and responsibility. He rubbed her leg tenderly, his gaze serious. “You’ll tell me if there’s anything more I can be doing to help?”

“I promise,” she said with a sweet smile, leaning forward to kiss him.

He obliged, taking her face in his hands. He had just brought her mouth to his, when she jumped and cried out as though stabbed. “Christ, Claire, are ye —?” He reached for her face, panicked—but the expression on it, the direction of her gaze told him everything.

He dropped the hand at once to her belly to settle between both of hers. “Is it — he’s — she’s — ?”

She nodded and pursed her lips, glowing with quiet light as she held the child, as tightly as she could. “Hello there, little love.”

“Oh, lass...” Jamie moved quickly to kneel on the floor beside her, kissing her cheek and wrapping his arms around her. “What does it feel like?” he asked, as he leaned his head against her shoulder. The wonder in his heart, the hope—“Is it kicking?”

“No, still early for that. It’s just the first quickening,” she said, blinking hard and smiling. “It’s a bit like—like popcorn in my belly.”

“Like—what kind of corn?”

“I’ll have to make you some,” she laughed. “I just mean it’s like—little bubbles popping.” She shook her head, awed, in another place, by the look in her eyes. “So she’s—he’s—really in there, then...”

“Did ye doubt it?”

“No,” she murmured softly, “just...it’s good to feel him...her...to feel that there’s a tiny person in there, not just some rogue germ that’s silently infected my body.”

“Well, and it is rather like a wee germ, is it not?” he said gently, tracing wee circles on her belly. “Tiny living creature that feeds off ye, unseen?”

She leaned her head against his, giving a soft laugh of agreement. “Well, let’s hope it grows up far more cute and capable than a germ.” They were just a warm bundle of happiness, together, voices barely more than a whisper, as though heeding Brianna’s threats against waking the babe.

“Wi’ the way its mother is,” he said, reaching up to touch her face, “I canna honestly see how it could fail on either point.”

“Flatterer.”

“No’ flattery: science....The Genetics dinna lie, aye?”

They shook together with silent laughter, but at length, simply let the quiet of the night fall over them. He’d carry her to bed, when she’d fallen asleep, and ensure she was up in plenty of time for the two of them to drive into town for her examination. His back did ache and his knees would
punish him for it in the morning, to be sure; and certainly she’d wanted to study, longer.

Just at present, though, there was nothing more important than this.
Unimaginable

Chapter Summary

Tumblr prompt: For when Claire eventually is preggers, their first time with an ultrasound machine.

Chapter Notes

SO....here’s the thing: 1951 is at *least* ten years too early for fetal ultrasound.

HOWEVER, this was one of the first FMM scenes I wrote after the reunion (even before this prescient ask!) and at the time, I wasn’t even thinking about historical accuracy. Soooooo, I’ll ask you to put on your suspenders of disbelief and just enjoy the anachronistic ride.

[Also, there’s a bit more of a time jump on this one than I normally go for, but I was feeling antsy to get to a landmark scene, so HERE WE ARE. (but I’ve got some planned flashbacks in the works for later, so don’t hesitate to request scenes from the months I passed over, if you’ve got a need!)]

Late April, 1951; Harvard University Hospital

“Fine—Sweetheart—I’m fine!”

The words were barely more than a muffled mumble into his shirt. Based on how tightly he was clutching me, I should have insisted to speak with him directly instead of leaving the message with the Fernacre receptionist; or at the very least, I should have been more emphatic with her that there was absolutely no emergency at hand.

I hugged him tighter in reassurance. “I’m so sorry, darling—I truly didn’t mean to frighten you. Everything’s fine, I promise.”

“But Nancy said ye were in hospital.”

“At the hospital—at Harvard—”

“Aye, not your proper hospital—and I was in the furthest pastures—” he said in a rush, cupping my head hard. “It took them so long to ride out to track me down—that—and then the Traffic—I thought—the bairn—”

God, and what must he have thought? With my being several weeks past six months, the same time at which—
“We’re fine, Jamie, I swear. See? We’re in the academic wing, not intensive care.” I pulled out of his arms and tugged him toward the open door nearby. “Come with me: I have something to show you.”

Trying to suppress my grin, I ushered him into an empty lecture hall and closed the door behind us.

Standing there, still in his work clothes and smelling of horse, Jamie was breathing heavily and looking as though he meant to either cry or fight someone or both. “Please say what’s happened so I can stop this aching in my chest.”

Despite his agitation, I managed at length to get him to sit in the professor’s chair. I leaned against the desk facing him, trying to keep back the storm of happiness. “You know I had my final examinations this morning?”

A nod, a pause, and then a tentative, “…Did they go well?”

“Well, I think. But as I was gathering my things and headed out, my professor suddenly stopped me and asked if I’d be willing to assist one of the med-tech research departments with a demonstration. I was taken aback of course, but I trust Dr. Gordon—you remember, he’s the one that’s been so impressed and supportive?—so I was willing to see what was what, at least.”

This exposition did not seem to have done anything to lessen Jamie’s tension; in fact, he looked downright alarmed at mention of me participating in some sort of vague experiment. Well, so had I been!

I went on, hastily. “And so he led me to the research wing and introduced me, and—And well, I called Fernacre as soon as they explained what it was that they were going to be testing out, because—Oh, Jamie, it would have been absolutely magical to show you as it was happening. But I managed to get the next best thing.”

I handed him the glossy print, heart thudding. “It’s something like an X-ray, see? This was only a prototype—very few people in the world have used this technology.” He kept staring down, and I babbled anxiously to fill the silence. “It isn’t even a good likeness of the fuzzy readout I saw. I badgered someone to find a camera, and the flashbulb reflecting against the glass television screen makes it quite hard to see, and I’m sure the print itself isn’t great, either—I badgered another department to develop it for me quickly, so it’s barely more than a blur, but…”

For more than half a minute Jamie had stared down at it, turning it this way and that—but finally, the image must have clicked into place, for he gasped and nearly dropped it.

“You see it?” I was beaming, holding back tears. “Can you see?

“Is that…?”

“Yes,” I choked out, “that’s him.”

So engrossed was Jamie in the image before him that he didn’t immediately seem to hear me. Then, he looked up so sharply it must have hurt his neck, blinking like he’d stepped into bright sun. “H—him??”

“You can’t tell in this shot,” I whispered, not meaning it to be a whisper, but so hoarse with feeling I couldn’t help it, “but the technician was certain.”

“We’re going—” Jamie was grinning like an utter addle-pated simpleton. “—to have a—a wee lad?”

I nodded, smiling back but also weeping, lips pursed tight, and suddenly unable to speak at
all through the lump of happiness in my throat.

“Oh, Claire…” Jamie was on his feet in a second, laughing and holding me as tightly as in the hallway, but this time in joy. “Oh, LOVE!”

The next I knew, he was beaming into my eyes, holding my face. “I’d have been just as thrilled wi’ a wee lassie, mo chridhe, but….Jesus, God, to KNOW—!! It’s…absolutely miraculous.”

“Honestly, this is— unimaginable to me, too,” I whispered, leaning my forehead against his as I looked down at my belly (at my son!). “To be able to see an unborn child….To be able to see rightinto the womb without cutting! I never even dreamed of such a thing. Jamie, it…I saw him.”

“And he’s—allright?”

“As far as they could tell.” I sighed and smiled, giving in. “Yes…yes, he’s alright.”

If two sane people could be delirious with joy and relief, it was us. We must have looked quite out of our senses to any passerby, so intensely we were beaming and grinning and clinging tightly to faces and hands.

Without preamble, Jamie stuck the precious photograph in his breast pocket, swept me up into his arms (ignoring any protest against handling my massive bulk), and settled back into the chair, cradling me in his lap.

We sat there in beatific silence for I don’t know how long, with soft touches and wordless sounds of tenderness and awe.

At last, Jamie simply couldn’t contain himself. “What will we name him? Our—son?”

We hadn’t discussed names at all, to date—both of us perhaps afraid to tempt fate until the birth was closer at hand. But I had seen him, today—seen the outlines of his tiny feet move at the same exact moment I’d felt him kick—And it changed everything. There was still risk, and there was still fear; but the hope in me was glowing and radiating throughout my entire being. This child, this little boy, was alive and well. He would be well. And he needed a name.

“Well, let’s see….” I beamed and traced patterns on Jamie’s shoulder. “I suppose we can’t have a Brian AND a Brianna.”

Jamie laughed, “No, indeed. The first Brian Fraser will get the big head up in heaven. Though what about your Da? Henry’s a good, strong name, aye? What d’ye think?”

“I’d very much like to use it as a second or third name… but I can’t quite see it as his first.”

“His,” Jamie echoed in a gleeful murmur. “…He’s a him.”

My delighted giggle hit me mid-kiss. “Yes, darling,” I crooned against his lips, “he’s a him.”

Jamie brightened. “Say, now, what about Robert? That was my wee brother’s name, and one of my Da’s as well.”

I must have made a face at this, for he smiled and rubbed my belly, leaning down to whisper confidentially, “Your mam doesna like your name one bit, wee Rabbie.”

I laughed and amended, fairly, “If you feel strongly about it, I might be persuaded. I’ve just—Honestly, I’ve never liked the name Robert. Robert…. ROBERT….” I tried the name several more
times, making grotesque faces as I tasted the syllables. “No, sorry, just won’t do.”

Jamie wasn’t offended, and in fact, we both repeated the rejected name a few more times each, trying out ridiculous accents and intonations to completely rule it out as a frontrunner until we were little more than a mass of giggles there in the professor’s chair.

Then, as if by magnetic force, we quieted and turned our eyes back to my belly—to our little him.

We were still for a long time, both of us imagining we could see our son curled up asleep, as I had so briefly and hazily today.

“Lambert?” Jamie said.

I smiled fondly, but shook my head.

“William?” I offered softly, a while later. “For your brother?”

Jamie made a sound of acknowledgment, thinking, but said nothing.

There was a bird singing outside the tall, sunny window. Leafy sun-shadows spangled the walls and a tiny breeze brought the scent of spring to surround us.

And as a second bird chimed in outside our little haven, Jamie’s hand tightened lightly, significantly, on my belly, eyes shining. “What about… Ian?”

“… Ian…” I breathed back, putting my hand over his, feeling something settle perfectly into place.

“Oh, yes, that’s… Ian…”

Not the blood-brother long-mourned: the brother of Jamie’s heart whose loss was still an open wound. They’d known each other all their lives; had fought together and defended one another, had been each others’ champions in battle and at home. And it struck me for the first time that Ian Murray was the only brother I myself had ever known, too. Ian had been a true kindred spirit, ever an ally in our den of blood-Frasers. And beyond that, Ian was—had been my friend. I missed his ready smile and his wit, his compassion….

Ian.

It was painful—but perfect.

“Ian… Henry,” Jamie murmured reverently. “A fine name.”

“Ian Henry… Fergus?…” I offered, my voice cracking.

I felt the convulsion go through Jamie and I touched his face. I know, love. I know.

Lord, the grief—the grief of holding one son between us and longing for the one we’d left behind; and for Jamie, how much more raw that grief. For Fergus had been there with him for those two broken years, had been a joy and a comfort to him when little else could be; and we could never see him again.


“Fraser,” we finished together in a whisper, all four hands covering our little boy. Life and loss, joy and mourning, so inextricably intertwined.
There were tears in Jamie’s eyes, as there were in mine, and his voice was deep and husky with love as he looked down at our hands and rubbed gently. “You’ll do them all proud, Ian.”

And damn me, if our little guy didn’t kick, right on cue.
Round and Round

Chapter Summary

Tumblr prompt: "I would love to see Jamie at a like carnival or fair and Claire introducing him to all those weird foods in FMM! What would he think of cotton candy or a funnel cake?"

May, 1951

“Jesus—fucking—holy—blasted—G’ughh—”

I thought the last word was likely, ‘God,’ but it was anybody’s guess, really, drowned out as it was by yet another bout of vomiting and the sudden blast of music from a nearby loudspeaker.

“Oh, love…That bad, is it?” My tender, spousal concern was acknowledged only with a string of Gaelic curses, surprisingly creative ones for a man so laid low.

It was a gorgeous hot day (bright enough that I was grateful for my broad hat), but it did make the scent of vomit that much more inescapable. The county fair had come to town, and with both of us having the rare treat of being off on a Saturday, we’d decided to make a family outing of it. Though it was hardly a grand exposition, both Jamie and I felt giddy as Bree strolling around amidst all the merriment, taking in the exhibits, music, livestock, food, and rides…including a deceptively innocent-looking Merry-go-Round.

“It was so good of you to try it for Bree’s sake, love.” I rubbed Jamie’s back, trying my level best not to laugh at the way his hunched back seemed to have lost all its vertebrae. “Is there anything I can get you to make you feel a bit better?”

He raised his head a fraction from the garbage can, high enough only to glare at me. “How about a trip through the stones to ten minutes ago so I might choose to SPIT on the fool contraption instead of ride it?”

“Not sure that’s quite how it works, my love,” I whispered, laughing and kissing his shoulder.

“Daddy? Da!? DA!?!?” Bree chirped from below. “Can we go—go an’ do the round’n’round again??”

Jamie looked down at our two-(no, two-and-a-half-and-then-some!)-year-old. “Do ye want to send your poor Da to his death?”

“Doesna—doesna’nt go to DEFF, Daddy,” Bree laughed as if he were being hilariously obtuse, “Goes ’round and ‘ROUND.”

“So I noticed,” he groaned, hunching once more over the garbage can and spitting.

“Okay, lessgo DO it!!!” and she was tearing off back toward the Merry-Go-Round.

“Ohhhh, no-you-don’t, little monster,” I said, swooping her up into my arms before she scuttled off. My sunglasses slipped to the tip of my nose, but I couldn’t immediately get them back up. Between
the heat, the sudden movement, Bree now like a boulder on my hip, a heavy handbag banging against the other, and my back abso-bloody-lutely killing me from toting around a seven-months-grown-human in utero, I suddenly felt woozy and completely spent. “Here, lovey,” I panted, trying to keep from toppling over, “Can you help push Mum’s glasses up? Yes, just—There we go, thank you, sweetheart.”

“Welcome!” she chirped and gave me a wet kiss on the mouth.

I mmm’ed happily and kissed her cheeks as we swayed together next to Jamie. “Was the ride fun for you, at least, baby?”

“Uh-HUH, s’was BUNCH fun!”

“Hear that, darling? ‘Bunch’ fun.”

From the plastic depths, I thought I heard him name a few other choice things it was ‘bunch’ of.

I did feel for Jamie. We should have known it would be no better than a boat for motion-sickness, and he’d spared ME from having to ride the thing, after all (though truth be told, I quite liked such exhilarations when not pregnant). But I was ALREADY shaking with silent mirth imagining the photos I’d snapped, all laid out in the cherished family album. The first few would show a sweet and lively scene: Jamie smiling cheerfully, standing with his hand on Bree’s back, she triumphantly mounted on her plastic chestnut steed waiting for the ride to start… and then would follow the play-by-play of the situation’s rapid deterioration, every revolution of the Merry-Go-Round showing a Jamie still more pale and hunched and desperate, until—Well, that LAST one was a blackmail goldmine for the ages.

“Daddy?” Bree asked suddenly, her face scrunched up as she peered at her father. “You mad’it Mama?”

That got Jamie’s attention and he straightened. “Mad at her?”

“All…” She waved her hand. “…mean.”

His eyes softened and they flicked up to me, verifying that I wasn’t in fact upset. “No, I’m no’ cross at either of ye, a leannan,” he promised her. “The ride on the Merry’round just made my wame all wobbly, such that I forgot my manners.”

I bounced Bree on my hip. “I bet sometimes you feel a bit grumpy when your tummy hurts, too, right?”

“Oh, aye,” she conceded, a flash of pure Scottishness beaming through, as it did from time to time. She leaned over and gave Jamie’s elbow a clumsy pat. “Sorry for y’r tummy hurted.”

“That’s verra kind of ye to say, mo chridhe.”

“Havva snack, w’feel ALL bedder, okay?”

“…Suggests the young miss with NO motive of her own,” I said, nuzzling my nose against hers.

“Oh, definitely not,” Jamie agreed soberly, eyes twinkling. He stretched, replaced his hat, and exhaled, then gave a small ha! of surprise. “I will say, Bree-love, a wee bite does sound just the thing.”

“Good, let’s HAVV’it.”
“If there had been ANY doubt about your parentage, Bree, that bottomless pit of a stomach would have been proof-positive.” I sighed. “Alright, you two, let’s see what we can rustle up. Here, Jamie, will you—?” I honestly felt like I was going to fall over.

Jamie obligingly plucked her out of my arms. “Jesus, lass,” he said with an exaggerated groan, “but you’re getting big.”

“Nuh-uh, Da, I’m the little.”

“Aye, you’re still the little, for now,” he agreed, tenderly tucking her hair behind her ears, “Before long you willna be the littlest, though.”

She nodded, sagely. “When Beeyin’s comin.’”

“Aye, cub,” he agreed, grinning at me, “when Baby Ian comes.”

Brianna couldn’t be convinced for anything that just ‘Ian’ would do, and insisted each time on referring to her brother by what she considered his full title: Baby Ian. The only problem with this was that she couldn’t seem to manage all the syllables in a row; hence, “Beeyin”; hence as well, many private family jokes, such as equating him to a wee bean; or when the wee lad would start jouncing me about like a racehorse, Jamie cocking his head to the side and asking, ‘Beeyin your bonnet?’, and other such delightful silliness.

“All right, let’s see about some chow. You two stay here,” I indicated a nearby shaded picnic table, “and I’ll see what I can scrounge for us. What kind of snack do you want, Bree?”

She screwed up her face in ferocious concentration before saying definitely, “Som’fin GOOD.”

“Well, thank you for being so specific. Very helpful, I don’t think. Any preferences?” I asked Jamie.

“Som’fin good sounds perfect,” he said with an attempt at a wink.

“Oooooooo!” Bree squealed a few minutes later when I returned with the goodies.

“Cotton candy,” I explained, carefully passing Jamie the paper cone supporting the precarious pink cloud.

“Cotton?” he asked dubiously. “And it’s edible?”

“Just spun sugar,” I said with a grin. “Now, Bree, take your fingers and—No-no, just pinch a little off with your—oh—Oh, well.”

Bree had stuck her entire face into the sticky mass and taken a monumental bite, pulling back with wisps of pink in her eyebrows, enraptured.

Jamie looked skeptical to the extreme. “Does it taste nice, cub?”

“Uh-huh!” Bree clawed out a fistful of fluff and shoved it upward toward Jamie’s mouth. “TASTE!”

Jamie gave me a preemptive grimace and took a tentative bite. “Holy Moses,” he said, blinking hard and shuddering as he swallowed. “It’s like pouring the whole sugar bowl direct into my mouth.”

“It’s GOOD,” Bree insisted, chowing down with relish.

“None so verra filling, I’d wager, but as long as ye like rotting your teeth out—”
“Here,” I laughed, “I came prepared with other options as well.” I pulled the next item from the bag. “Care for some Elephant Ear? Just a silly name, I promise,” I said hastily, seeing his alarm. “No pachyderms harmed in the making of this treat.”

“What is it, then?” he asked, peering around Bree’s head. “Pastry?”

“Try it while there’s trying to be had,” I said, handing it to him. “I’m eating for two, and we fully intend to eat our way through the entire elephant.”

He did enjoy the fried dough, going back for several huge bites, licking powdered sugar from his fingertips. “Lord, though I dinna ken if I can manage wi’ any more sweeties.”

“Alright, let’s see how you manage this.”

Jamie had probably never had American corn in any form before, I reflected, let alone on the original cob. I certainly hadn’t grown up eating it, and so it didn’t occur to me to buy it at the market. From the gusto with which Jamie inhaled the roasted ear, slathered with butter and spices, though, it was going to have to become a regular staple.

“No foolish name for this one?” he asked as he was finishing the last few bites.

“Not as far as I know,” I shrugged, trying to wipe Bree’s face, which was an unmitigated disaster-zone.

"Pity. Missed a good chance.”

“Oh?”

He waved the naked cob suggestively. “Corn on the co….” And the barest-whisper of “…ck.”

“You’re a ridiculous human being,” I murmured, leaning in to kiss him.

“And you are absolutely lovely,” he murmured back against my lips, squeezing my knee.

“C’n I havva cornna-cock, too?”
Chapter Summary

From the tumblr prompt: "Can Claire and Jamie go camping? I think they need a getaway.... :)

Late June, 1951

James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser was an impressive sight at any time of the day or year. Naked, silhouetted against a bright summer moon; the curve of leg and hip and scar all gilded into sharp edges by the glow of the fire behind him… he was positively primordial, ancient man surveying the vast wilderness.

“God, it’s just…..”

He didn’t finish the sentence, just stood there on the verge of our mountaintop, taking in the sight of the sleeping valley below.

I could have finished the sentence for him, though: …like home.

The Green Mountains of Vermont—or this section of them, anyway—were quite similarly beautiful to those of Scotland. The main difference was the trees, of course: in contrast to the sparse, heathered slopes of Jamie’s birthplace, every inch of these mountains was covered in lush forests that spiced the air with the tangs of evergreen and leaf mold. Still, looking out across the horizon, the ranges had that same rolling and dipping quality, that sense of movement about them that felt so much like the Highlands. One could almost imagine looking down into one of these valleys and seeing the roof of Lallybroch below, enticingly belching smoke from the fires of Mrs. Crook’s promised supper.

—and I supposed that Jamie was doing just that.

I left him to dwell in the serenity of the moment, there at the top of the horizon. My own peace was complete, astonishing in its sensory fullness:

the beauty of the night, of the rolling valley far below,

a warm breeze across my naked skin, the same that swelled the forest into a rustling, shushing chorus,

the afterglow of lovemaking pulsing gently through me, there in our nest of blankets by the fire on the mountaintop,

and Jamie. Always, Jamie.

Tom and Marian had many times this year offered us the use of their mountain cabin in Vermont. Between work schedules, my schooling, pregnancy, and the general hustle and bustle of normal life, we simply hadn’t made the time for such a lavish treat as a holiday away. At last, though, with the academic term over and with the baby due in just over a month, we’d decided that getting away, just the two of us, was just the thing. Lord knew, once a nursing infant was in the mix, it could be quite
some time before we could do so again.

Jamie, true to form, had fretted over me for weeks leading up to our departure, trying to call the whole thing off. ‘Sassenach, what if the bairn comes early?’ … ‘There willna be a hospital for miles and miles. What if something happens?’ … ‘If ye think I can deliver a child, woman, you’re WRONG.’

But at last, he’d had no choice (short of chaining me to the house, that is) but to relent, and the further we drove westward, the higher the elevation rose, the quieter he became. His eyes got wider and wider, the glory of being among mountains soaking into him like sunshine.

After settling our things in the cabin earlier that afternoon (‘Rustic,’ the Harpers had warned us) (‘Better equipped than any Highland castle,’ Jamie had snorted as we walked in and saw the full kitchen), we’d made a few hasty sandwiches and ventured out for a walk before the light went. The vistas were absolutely spectacular, even more so when the skies were painted with the pinks and scarlets of sunset.

Jamie had built us a fire a few hundred yards from the house, when we got back, just near the overlook, and we’d spent hours snuggled together before it, toasting marshmallows, sipping hot chocolate heated over the coals, laughing and talking and telling stories as the stars brightened overhead.

At last, the quiet and beauty of the night had settled around us, and we’d made love there in the clearing, slowly and sweetly. For a very long time after, we’d lain panting and trembling, cocooned together in perfect calm, no demands on our time save enjoyment of one another.

…..and, eventually, pragmatically, those of Jamie’s bladder.

From somewhere in the woods, there came the sound of something large moving about; a deer, I thought, since Jamie was not reaching for an absent knife. He did start, though, the lively night pulling him out of his trance. Assured there was no danger, he turned to me with a slightly-sheepish grin. “Forgive me, mo chridhe, I was lost in fancy.” He began picking his way across the grass back toward the fire. “Feeling alright, Sassenach? All well?”

“Very well,” I promised, “as long as you don’t make me move from this spot.” I burrowed further into the blankets in illustration. “Couldn’t budge for all the tea in China.”

“Dinna fash, lass.” He crouched beside me and provided a very entertaining view as he slid his hands under me, “I’ll carry ye up to bed.”

“No, you won’t,” I said, neatly rolling away. “We’re sleeping out here.”

“Certainly we are,” he laughed, rolling me back, “are not.”

“Why ever not?”

He gave me a look. “Ye think I’m going to let my eight-months-gone wife sleep like an animal on the cold ground?”

“It isn’t cold.” I raised an eyebrow. “And you’d not have given it a second thought, back in Scotland, would you?”

He blinked, then laughed. “Christ, you’re right,” he groaned, putting a knee down and scrubbing a hand over his face. “I’ve become quite the pampered popinjay in only a year, aye?”
“Well, you can earn your tough-as-saddle-leather badge back tonight. Come here,” I wheedled, patting the blankets. “Come keep your lady warm for the night.”

He obliged, coming in to settle spoon-fashion behind me. “My lady,” he murmured, precisely as I breathed, “God, a year…”

We both laughed and exhaled together.

He kissed my neck. “It’s been a wonderful year, mo ghraidh.”

“To think that this time last year…” I shuddered and kissed his hand. “No, it doesn’t do to think of what life was, last June.”

“No,” he agreed, “it doesna.”

He’d been close to starvation on the streets of Boston, scouring the streets and hospitals for any news of me, my whereabouts. I’d been—I’d just been. I’d loved my work, adored Bree; but apart from the promise of seeing her grow up happy and loved….I hadn’t much hope.

Now…

“I guess that means this could almost be a wedding anniversary trip, couldn’t it?”

“Which one?”

“What?”

“Which wedding?”

I laughed, surprised. “Well, I did mean the one last year, but I guess we’re pretty close to our first as well. When would it have been? June? Late June?”

“I canna recall the precise date,” he admitted, running his hands up my thigh and onto the huge curve of my belly, “but that seems correct.”

“And our twentieth-century anniversary is the 8th of July…meaning you found me in July….and little wiggleworm, here, should be born in either July or August…” I snuggled back against him and pulled his arm tighter around me, sighing happily. “Good things tend to happen to us in the summertime, don’t they?”

He kissed his way down the curve of my shoulder. “Aye, they certainly do.”

“I’d like the bairns to know a place like this,” he murmured a while later into my neck.

“The cabin?” I had very nearly nodded off in the cozy silence that had intervened. My voice was scratchy and sleepy. “Why is that, love?”

Jamie didn’t immediately answer; and when he did, I was surprised to hear a slight hesitation in his voice, a carefulness in his words that bespoke unease. “Ye ken I love our life, Claire, aye?”

I nodded and squeezed his hand.

“It’s more than I could ever have dreamed of, let alone have hoped to have for myself, for you, and for them.” He pulled me closer with one hand and spread the other absently over my belly. “I’m so grateful,” he whispered with deep feeling, “for the safety; the plenty; our home; having the income to take care of our family in comfort; that you’re able to pursue your profession; that the bairns will be able to pursue theirs, one day, wi’ nothing like birthplace or station to hold them back…. I wouldn’a trade our life for anything.”
I reached behind to stroke his hip, waiting.

“…But I also canna shake some sense in my heart that—that *this* is how things are meant to be.”

“Naked in the woods?” I teased gently.

“Aye,” he laughed, just what I’d wanted, his unease evaporating in a moment, “*exactly* so.” He ran his hand across my legs, coming up to cup my breast. “Nothing but my brown-haired lass, naked in my arms…” An intake of breath hissed gently from us in unison as we felt the sudden shifting within me. “And new life, promised to us…."

We lay still, his hand over mine as we gloried in feeling little Ian moving about. I wondered if he was dreaming.

*That they may be sweet, little love.*


I pulled him as close as I could. “We *will* make this part of our life, Jamie, if you wish it.”

“We will?”

“We’ll come on holiday with them as often as we can, just like this. And, eventually—Well, it can’t be all the time, particularly not once I’ve started medical training; but as soon as we can afford it, maybe we’ll have a second home somewhere wild, somewhere like this.”

“A *second* home?” he asked, dubious. “Folk keep two houses, then?”

“Not all, not even most; but Tom and Marian manage it, don’t they?”

“Aye,” he said slowly as he glanced up at the house, considering, “Aye, just so….But Tom owns the whole of Fernacre. Will we truly ever have the means to afford such extravagance?”

“MDs make some of the best money available,” I said, as simply as I could, “and other than being charitable and giving as much away as we can manage, I can’t think of a more worthwhile way to use that financial freedom, than to give you this.”

“….*Thank you,* Sassenach.” He sounded absolutely gutted with earnest gratitude, like someone that had just been handed an infinite fortune with no caveat. “*Truly.*”

“Well, thank me when and if I actually get admitted to medical school.” I groaned with that sudden, familiar wash of visceral anxiety. “*If, if, if.*”

“When,” he insisted, as he always did. “*WHEN.*”

We settled in, held tight together in a warm heap of love, letting sleep wash over us.

“Somewhere wi’ a mountain?” Jamie murmured just before I slipped completely under.

“I promise.”
Later that same night

I knew that Jamie was awake, though I couldn’t truly see him. The fire had burned down to embers, and my eyes were bleary with sleep, but I didn’t need any light; I could feel his hands on the bare skin of my belly, hear the gentle Gaelic he was murmuring so sweetly over me, over us.

“...Jamie?”

He shifted at once and scooted toward me to touch my face. “I’m so sorry, mo nighean donn,” he whispered, kissing my cheek. “I didna at all mean to wake ye.”

“Dinna fash, darling,” I laughed, brushing the hair out of his eyes as he leaned over me. “What was it you were saying?”

“Oh.” Even in the barest light I could see the sheepish expression. “Wee Ian was moving about and I was only talking to him, a bit.”

“Yes, I know,” I said, grinning gently. “....What did you tell him?

He shrugged and laid down beside me. “Just—just foolish talk, ken.”

“My love,” I whispered, tenderness surrounding us, “you don’t have to tell me, if you don’t wish to...but I know it wasn’t foolish.”

He stroked my arm, then brought his hand back to my belly. “Could ye understand any of it?”

“Only a word or two....There was one thing you said a few times. Avah—aval-lach?”

“A bhalach.”

“Yes, that’s one,” I said, wondering vaguely how in bloody hell it was spelled. “What does that one mean?”

“It only means ‘lad.’ Well, no, more...tender than that. More like...beloved boy. Sounds a bit daft in English, but it...it’s a deep kind of word to me, ken?”

“I thought maybe it was; just from the way you said it.”

“Do you speak to him often?” I asked, a while later.
“Aye,” Jamie admitted, “most every night, when you’re asleep.”

There was something in the sound of his voice that troubled me—a rawness, some hurt untended between us in the dark.

“I tell him,” he said at last, unprompted, “that I'm here... and I love him.” His hand tightened, spanning the breadth of the child as best he could. “And that I'll always love him, no matter what may come. I dinna—” He stopped and I could hear him swallow.

When he spoke again, his words were tight and hoarse. “Faith didna ken those things, I think.” He traced the lines of my hipbones, his eyes intent upon it so as not to look at me. “Didna ken that I loved her, or... So...”

His pain filled my body, bringing mine up from the void along with it, choking me. “Jamie...” I murmured, reaching out in the dark to touch his face. “Jamie, no. That’s just not so.”

“I would give anything to believe what ye say, Claire.” He sat up and laid his arms across his knees, the edges of him rimmed from the glow of a log that had suddenly caught again. I watched, mourned to watch his shoulders slowly hunch, his head come to hang between them. “But it is the truth.”

So much I wanted to quiet and comfort him, to pull him back down to my heart and convince him of the truth that I knew; but I merely laid a hand on his back and let the quiet of the confessional descend upon us; let him speak all his soul.

“I didna have the fear in me, then.” He wasn’t crying, but his voice audibly ached, so raw. “Not about the babe, not truly. All my real fear and worry was for the rest of it: what had happened in Scotland; how I was to provide for my family; the burden of Charlie and the war and—”

A long, shuddering breath.

“Amidst all that, I think I took the bairn’s safe arrival for granted—that at least will be well, I thought, even if all the rest crumbles. It never—never in truth occurred to me that I wouldna have time to tell her.”

The silence that fell was so thick with sorrow it seemed that I could almost touch it. I rubbed my thumb softly where it lay, feeling his scars. I'm here.

“Had I the chance to live it all out again, I’d scream ‘to hell wi’ preventing the war, to hell wi’ Randall and everyone else.’” His voice crescendowed sharply with the vehemence of it, then tapered back to whisper as he finished. “...and spend those six months at home, not leaving your side for a moment until she was born. For, what was the cost of her life? Was there anything we accomplished that was more important than her?” His head hung further, and I could see him holding it in his hands. “All for naught. That I could make it all right.”

“Oh, my love... Listen to me.” I did make him turn, then, forced that barrier between us to vanish “We’re never going to stop thinking of her, of Paris—what we each could have done differently; but you’re only remembering the end. Don’t you remember the good days, too, when she was with us?”

“Barely,” he admitted, the quiet truth of it breaking my heart.

“Well, I remember,” I said, rubbing his leg imploringly. “I remember that you kissed her and spoke to her, just like you do now to Ian. I remember your eyes lighting up when you touched my belly and felt her move, just like now. I remember so much happiness, even with all the upheavals swirling around us; and what happened in the end doesn’t change that.”
He nodded but it was only because he knew he ought. I could still feel the shame in his body, the pain.

“Come here,” I whispered, and after the barest hesitation, he laid down next to me once more. “She knew, Jamie.” I turned onto my side toward him and got his face in both my hands. “She did. As much as she was capable of knowing anything at all, she knew that we loved her. Yes, both of us.” I turned his head to me and made him look me in the eye as I whispered, “She knew the sound of your voice.”

“She...?” He blinked. “She did?”

I nodded, my lips trembling with the effort not to cry. “She would always move about when she heard you; not for male voices in general. Just yours.”

His mouth moved, but no sound came out.

“Ye never told me that,” he whispered when he found his voice. I started to apologize but he shook his head hard and pressed his forehead to mine. “Thank you. It means....”

It meant everything; to me, and to him.

We let ourselves weep, then, for her, just for a little while, in the safety of one another, in the safety of distance and the hope of still more redemption to come in just a few short weeks.

“I truly do believe that all will be well, wi’ Ian,” he said, reading my thoughts as I thumbed away his tears, and he, mine. “I have such verra great hope, now. I feel yours, as well, and that keeps me strong when I’ve doubts.... but I still must tell him, for her sake. I still need him to ken that his Da loves him.”

“Tell him every day until he’s born.” I laid a kiss in the palm of his hand, then brought it to rest overtop our little boy. “And then every day after that.”

In the dark, among the sweet scent of evergreens, the mountains bore witness to the bond.

“Tha gaol agam ort, Eóin, a bhalaich.”
Tumblr Anon said: This is a prompt for Bonnie & FMM: since BabyBree is becoming quite the strong minded little lady, can we see her get into some antics at the worst possible time?

Fernacre, July, 1951

“JESUS, lass!” Jamie hissed as he lunged to snatch Bree mid-stride and prevent what would have been a flying leap off the picnic table. He forced himself to exhale before setting her onto her feet and asking, “Why in the name of all that is holy and right do ye turn demon the instant we go out in public?”

The demon giggled.

“Brianna, hear me, it’s no’ a game, this.” He dropped to a crouch before her, trying to keep his already-worn temper in check. “I mean it. NO climbing up upon things, d’ye hear?”

“Ohayyy!” she trilled, beaming with joy, already turning on her heel.

“Wait just there, we’re not—”

But she was already out of reach, scampering off to join a pack of other children headed toward the play-slides.

“Stay within the yard!” he called after her. “Heaven BLOODY help me,” he groaned under his breath in Gaelic, getting back to his feet and his conversation. “I’m terribly sorry for that wee hooligan, Tom.”

“It’s alright, bud,” Tom Harper laughed, handing him back his bottle of terrible American beer. “Kids will be kids, no harm done.”

“Perhaps it’s some great test of parenting, to see how well I cope wi’out Claire to hand....or how poorly, as the case might be.”

It was the annual Fernacre employee summer picnic, or as Bree saw it, a battlefield ripe for the carnage her impish soul apparently craved. Scarce an hour the two of them had been there, and she’d already knocked over a pitcher of Lemonade, bitten another child who had bumped into her, squirted tomato sauce all down her front, and managed to get a lollipop stuck in her hair. This was to say nothing of the tantrum on the car ride about not being able to see the clouds (it being a hot, blue day and there being no clouds), and several outbursts of language he was more than grateful Claire had not been present to overhear. Nine days out of ten, Brie’s heartbreaking sweetness outweighed the net destruction (though there was plenty of the latter in any given day, and no mistake); but there would be a full moon brewing in the sky this evening, certainly, for Brianna Fraser had come out IN
FORCE.

“Really, though, she’ll grow out of it,” Tom said with a veteran’s confidence. “Our Rob was just the same at that age. It’s your first kiddo’s job to put you through the wringer. It’s in their contract and everything!” His wink went suddenly sideways as both brows furrowed over his sunglasses. “Speaking of which, Claire’s okay, I hope?”

“Oh, aye, she’s well enough,” Jamie assured him, taking what restorative strength he could from the watery excuse for a draught. “The babe kept her up all through the night, and she didna think she could manage being out the heat, besides.”

“Don’t blame her one bit.” He wiped sweat from his forehead before adding significantly, “Not long, now, huh?”

“No,” he grinned back, “not long at all.”

Earlier that morning

“Will you absolutely hate me if I stay in bed today?”

“Oh, I'd happily give you BOTH, if I could!” She rubbed her now-still belly ruefully and winced a bit. “Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ, little one, you have got to give Mummy a BREAK when she’s trying to sleep. We can’t keep having these midnight drill parades!”

A whinnying horse galloped into the room and catapulted herself onto the bed next to Claire. “Mum-ma, you comin’?”

“No, lovey,” Claire said, pulling Bree close into a great, warm hug. “Mummy’s going to stay here and take a nap.”

“Nappin’ isna FUN!”

“Oh, it’s LOADS of fun for me! But you and Daddy will go and have a lovely time at the picnic, just the two of you.”

Bree grumbled for a minute, then brightened. “Can’see iffie’s ‘wake? If Beeyin’s ‘wake?”

Claire smiled that warm, sweet smile he loved so well. She pulled up the hem of her nightshirt from under the blankets, patiently letting Bree inspect the whole expanse of her with exuberant pats.

After a few moments, Bree glowered up and whispered in a confidential yell, “I dinna heer’im.”

“I don’t feel him ei—Oh! There he is!”

“Of course not, mo nighean donn,” He tucked the covers more securely around her and then stood, looking around to see what he might bring her.

“Would it be pressing my good luck to beg you to take the monster with you?”

He kissed her, then Ian. “...Which one?”

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“I don’t feel him ei—Oh! There he is!”
Bree shrieked in delight, dissolving into insane giggles as she poked the heaving mass back to and fro. At such a degree of intensity, it was rather like the game Jamie had seen the Fair where you clubbed the stuffed groundhog with a mallet only to have another pop up on the other side. ‘Clubbed’ indeed, for Claire was obliged to grab Bree’s hands and croon, “Gently, Bree, baby, *gently*...”

After a long, peaceful while, Claire happened to glance up and catch his expression. She was a canny one, his wife, and she gave him a gimlet eye at once. “And just what are you smirking at like a cat in the cream?”

In truth, he WAS grinning, so widely he must have looked positively deranged. “You are. SO. BIG.”

“You ARSE,” she laughed, managing to land him a kick in the belly even through the blankets.

“Ye ARE! I mean, LOOK!” He came to sit on the edge of the bed and joined Bree in outlining just how massive she was. “Big as a—a—”

“A HOUSE!” Bree finished helpfully, “or A ‘POTTAMUS!’”

“I do hope wee Ian comes out a fair shade more polite and complimentary than YOU lot,” Claire said, splitting a glare between the pair of them.

“And just think, you’ve *two weeks more,* *forbye*.”

“One and a half, thank you very much,” she corrected primly.

“But let’s just stop and consider.” He raised a significant brow. “Should wee Ian see fit to bide his time...”

“Don’t EVEN suggest it.”

“....It could be THREE weeks more...” He was having trouble speaking normally through the bubbling laughter. “....or even FOUR, until—”

“You wish four more weeks upon me, Jamie Fraser, and I will make you wish otherwise.”

Bree turned her coat in a flash. “Don’ wisp that at Mum-ma, Da.”

“Oh, verra well, if ye say so,” he said, mock-abashed, with a wink at his wife. Glancing at his watch, he groaned and straightened with a yawn. Claire’s tossing and turning in the night from Ian’s acrobatics hadn’t done him any favors, either. “Alright, a leannan, let’s see to your clothes and get along to the picnic.”

“You really do delight in seeing me as huge as a beached whale, don’t you?” Claire asked sardonically as Bree scurried from the room, cheering.

“Aye, I do,” he admitted freely, wrapping both his arms around her and nuzzling his nose against hers. “Truly one of the happiest sights I’ve ever seen.”

In the cave, he had many a time wondered—longingly—what Claire might look like at the time of her full term; and what he had imagined paled in comparison. She was full and lush in every single inch of her. Hair thick and glossy. Skin softly glowing like
sunlight on a flower petal. Whisky eyes seeming to sparkle with the same light, heavy with a soft, sleepy happiness. Claire was absolutely exquisite in this height of her bearing, and he would happily spend all his days glorying in the memory of her, this way.

“I never imagined...” He bent and laid a kiss on her straining navel, reflecting that spending a fair number of those days in good fun and laughter would *also* be greatly rewarding. “…that anyone could get even bigger wi’ child than JENNY.”

“Bree!” Claire shouted, swatting him with a pillow as he lunged up to kiss her cheeks and neck ferociously, “tell your Da to take his imagination and shove it up his—”

A crash sounded from the other room, followed by a ‘whoops-eeee’, which, in retrospect, had not boded well for the rest of the day

“MISTER FRASER!!!”

His head whipped around so fast he heard his neck crack.

She was on the top rung of the fence separating the yard from the adjacent pasture, and he felt his heart stop as she fell from it headfirst.

The next moments as he sprinted toward her seemed to pass as slowly as in a dream. He could hear shouts and cries behind him, but he didn’t stop for an instant until he was vaulting over the fence and snatching her up off her back. He didn’t remember what words he may have uttered, or in what language, but a few moments later, he was exhaling in great gasps of relief seeing that she was conscious and not injured, just badly scared with the breath knocked out of her.

Dazed, she began to cry with great long wails that drove away the two mares that had come to investigate the visitor to their pasture. Thank the Lord she hadn’t chosen the next paddock over, where the true brawlers were kept.

“You’re alright?” he demanded once more as he got back to the right side of the fence, vaguely aware he was speaking in Gaelic. “You’re not hurt?”

She coughed and gasped for breath, considered, then showed him, lips trembling, a slightly-red patch on the fleshy part of her palm.

He laid a fervent kiss in her hand—silently praising heaven she hadn’t broken the wrist, for all that she was still crying like a banshee—and then could contain himself no longer.

“What did I *say* about climbing?” His teeth were gritted tight and his hands were shaking even as they strove to remain gentle. “AND about wandering off??”

“I din’knowww,” she wailed, hearing his tone and trying to hide her face in his chest.

“Ye DO know.” He pulled her up and made her look at him. “Brianna Ellen, ye *must* listen to what I say! Don’t ye understand ye could have gotten very badly hurt? Lass, *look* at me.”

She was sobbing, now, working herself up into hysterics. “C—can—na—”

“Why not?”
“Cause—mad—dit—m—meee—”

He went completely still at that. Closing his eyes, he took a deep, deep breath.

Help me, Da.

With gestures and apologetic looks, he shooed the well-meaning onlookers back to their picnic and made for the big oak tree in the opposite corner of the yard. It was well-shaded, and he sat down against the trunk, holding his daughter to his chest as she sobbed against his shoulder.

Thank God she wasn’t hurt. Thank GOD.

“Bree, cub?” The walk had calmed him, and he was glad to hear his voice was gentle and soft. “Look at me, aye?”

After a moment, she glanced timidly up (face red as an apple and covered in liquids of all description) and he smiled at her, stroking her cheek and her hair. “I’m here, a leannan. It’s just me...just Da... I love you.”

“Love—” she hiccuped through her tears, “—too.”

He kissed her and held her close for a minute before setting her on his legs facing him and saying gravely, “But ye made me verra afraid today, a chuisle. Ye disobeyed and could have hurt yourself.”

“I did’nint mean to,” she said, rubbing her eyes.

“Aye, I ken ye didna mean to get hurt,” he said, gently pulling her fists away from her face, “but ye meant to be climbing the fence, even after I told ye not.”

“...It was fun, though,” she offered with a shrug, voice tremulously defiant.

“Aye, well...”

Come on, Da.... How would ye have explained this to me?

A shrill whinny sounded in the distance, then another, and Jamie glanced around to see the two sorrel foals playing together in the south pasture, teasing and prancing about one another.

He smiled and felt peace whispering through the grasses. Until the day break, and the shadows flee away.

“Ye ken, when wee Ian is born, Bree, he’s going to grow up fast. Before long, he’ll be as big as you and running about on his own! And you’ll want your wee brother to be safe, aye?”

She straightened at that, no longer crying. Bairn safety was no small matter, in her book. She nodded.

“Say there were something like a great, nasty snake crawling about in the grass about to bite your brother on the foot.....Would ye just stand by and let him be hurt?”

Brianna looked up at him in absolute affront. “NO, I’d kill dat snake!”

He very nearly choked, but managed to keep a moderately straight face. Call upon a Fraser, and a Fraser ye shall get, he supposed; but he cleared his throat and plunged on, determined to make his point. “But what if wee Ian didna understand the beast was dangerous? What if he went running to
the snake because he thought it would be fun to play wi’ it?”

“Well...I jus’tell him not.”

“Aye, just so,” he said, “because we have to protect the people we love, d’ye see?”

“Uh-huh.” She was staring up at him, rapt but not quite understanding.

“So when I tell ye not to do things like climb the fence, mo chridhe, it’s only to keep ye safe, to keep ye getting hurt because I love you so. And when the bairn comes, it’ll be your job to keep him safe, too.”

She nodded emphatically. “I’ll do him safe, Da, promise.”

“But that means ye have to keep yourself safe, as well. Elder sisters have to be the best at obeying Mam and Da so the smaller bairns ken what’s the right way of things. Can ye do that?”

“Aye,” she said at once. “I’ll ‘bey.”

For precisely sixty seconds out of every hour, he predicted.

“Hear me, though, Bree: the next time ye disobey like ye did today, I shall have to strap ye. I dinna want to do it, not one bit, but it’s how you’ll learn. Are we understood?

“....What’s s-tuh-rap?”

“Getting smacked hard on the bottom wi’ a belt.”

“Hard?” she clarified, shocked.

“Aye, hard enough that it hurts.”

“But ye said—” She scrunched up her face and gestured with both hands. “NOT do things to KEEP me of getting hurted....”

A Dhia, Da, he laughed silently, how by all the saints did ye raise three—

“JAMIE!!”

His head snapped up and he saw Marian rushing down from the house, beckoning wildly, with a look of—

“Da—ddy—” Bree gasped out from where she bounced against his shoulder. “Why we runnin’?”

His heart was pounding.

“Because your brother has decided he’s going to arrive early.”
Ian

**July 21, 1951**

He was driving too fast, *still,* and he didn’t care.

The entire body of the *Car* had screamed as the tip of the bumper scraped a post box a mile back. Just a scratch—not to say repairing the damage wouldn’t be expensive—but no harm done to the box itself, so he had kept going.

On a day with clear roads, it would have been nearly three quarters of an hour’s drive from Fernace to the new hospital where Claire had planned to deliver; but the route on this particular Saturday was as plagued as Odysseus’, it seemed. Knowing precisely how precious time and haste were, this day, all of Boston was foiling and delaying him at every turn out of apparent spite.

“She says to tell you she’s fine,” Marian had said as they very quickly made for the parking lot. “She said her water broke unexpectedly, and that she was getting into the ambulance right that moment, and she’ll meet you at the hospital. And then she said to come as soon as you could but to, um…” and Marian had laughed nervously, attempting the unfamiliar words, “din-na-fash?”

But he *did* fash, immediately, fully, and at length. It was the *Ambulance* that had frightened him the most. Surely she would have called Mrs Byrd or even a Taxi if the need were less urgent?

The thoughts whirled around in his head, diving and pecking like carrion birds as he wove through the streets.

*A week and a half early….Was that premature enough to be concerning? Surely not terribly so. No, certainly it was nothing to worry over.*

….Lord but didn’t bairns usually lay quiet for days leading up to the waters coming? Ian had been wriggling and moving about like mad all the night.

Would he—

Would that somehow have made—?

…..Claire WOULDN’T have called the Ambulance, not unless there were something wrong; not unless she were in pain or the babe were in distress….

*Jesus.*

“I’m coming, mo nighean donn,” he muttered aloud, as though gritting his teeth harder would make it so.

*A Traffic* light changed to red and he slammed his foot down on the brake pedal just in time, getting a sounding horn from the vehicle behind him. “DEVIL OF THE SEVEN FUCKING MIDDENS TAKE YE,” he bellowed back in Gaelic.

He slammed his palm on the steering wheel for the futility of it. God, if he could only hear her voice, only let her know he was on his way. “Why the hell can they not put Phones in Automobiles?!” he demanded of this bloody great world and century that could find a way to let men FLY and yet not manage the most obvious of useful innovations.
But by the time the light turned green once more, he wasn’t angry. He was only making vows like never before in his life.

If she was hurting

If he missed the birth

If something were to happen to either of them

Both of them

Jamie sped faster. Let the law try and give him one of their blasted Tickets. He would not let Claire be alone, this time.

With a shock, Jamie realized that the woman behind the so-called Welcome Desk was the same that had refused him entry a year ago. He remembered that bell-shaped gleam of jet-black hair. He’d been dirty and near-starving, and she’d had him escorted forcibly out on sight before he could get any word on whether or not Claire worked there. Thank goodness there wasn’t time to waste on renewing old acquaintance.

“I’m looking—” he panted, all but slamming into the high wall of the station, “Wife—Giving—birth —Fraser? Claire Fr—Christ—Fraser?”

“Awww, how wonderful!” the woman beamed up at him in genuine, startling warmth. “The fathers’ lounge is on the fourth floor, sir. Elevators are just that way!”

“But where do I find my wife?”

The woman gave a knowing smile that she likely meant to be reassuring. “Just go up the fourth floor, Mr. Father-to-be, and the nurses will get you to the right place, okay? Congratulations in advance!!”

As he skidded in the direction the fickle ninny pointed, Jamie saw a crush of people already waiting to board the Elevator. Casting about wildly, he ran instead for the door to the stairs and bolted up them three at a time, spilling out into the fourth-floor corridor and nearly colliding with passersby as he swayed, trying to get his bearings. He practically lunged toward the nurses’ station when he finally caught sight of it. “My wife—(Pardon, Good day to ye, Mistr—er, Ma’am)—Claire Fraser? They said ye could take me to—?”

“Follow me,” the nurse behind the desk said shortly, grabbing a stack of papers and leading him down the corridor. She was very handsome-looking, of about Claire’s age, but where Claire exemplified kind, professional efficiency when on duty, this woman exuded nothing but irritation. On another day, he might have pitied her, wondered what it was troubling her or even asked in hopes of being of some assistance, but as it was, all he could think of was BY GOD and all the saints, this woman could hardly walk any slower if she TRIED.

“Here,” she said tersely at last, opening a door and ushering him inside. He blinked, for it looked astonishingly like his own sitting room at home, save for it was filled with half a dozen men in suits, all smoking or reading newspapers or both. Lounge.

“I do beg your pardon, Ma’am,” he said, with an attempt at cordiality, “In my haste, I wasna at all clear, my fault entirely. I need only to be directed to the room where my wife is delivering. Claire Fraser? She was rushed here in an Amb—”

“Fathers aren’t allowed in the delivery suites, sir,” the woman said with an immediate frosty
condescension that make him bristle. “I might be able to get you an update on how she is,” she said, clearly implying that it would be the last of her many important tasks, “but you’ll have to stay here.”

“For how long?” he asked, but he already knew the answer.

All the men in the room were staring scornfully at him. The woman gave him an equally-withering glare. “Until your wife is finished delivering.”

His fists were clenched. “My name is James Fraser,” he said carefully, quietly, giving her exactly one more chance to help him, “and you’ll tell me at once where I may find my wife.”

The woman recoiled as though he’d struck her. “Did you not hear me? Fathers are not allowed in the delivery suites. It is unsanitary and unseemly and—SIR!! You come right back—MR—Forr—? —FRASER! You stop right this moment! Security? SECURITY!”

He scanned the signs and arrows wildly. He bore left and ran as fast as he could toward Labor and Delivery until a man of nearly his own height caught him round the middle and smashed him against the wall. He swore profusely in Gaelic, getting only an elbow in the ribs for his trouble. Jamie could have taken the man down in a moment, but hurting someone on hospital premises would certainly not help him get to Claire’s side, let alone remain there for the course of the birth.

“I must see my wife,” he implored the small crowd of nurses and patients who had gathered, the sour, beautiful nurse looking smugly triumphant at the head. “Ye dinna understand, she CANNA be alone. I must be with her—I MU—”

“And as I explained to you, SIR,” the woman said, “it is simply NOT ALLOWED. Hospital policy dictates—”

“MY WIFE”—he snarled, his temper mere inches away from unleashing completely, “—is not a matter of policy, nor is my child, so you’ll take me to them peaceably, or GOD HELP ME, I shall —”

“Mr. Fraser!”

Jamie whipped his head around and—God and Mary and all the saints be praised—saw an archangel in form of Dr. Vernon Reynolds striding down the hall for him.

“Officer?” the good doctor said politely enough as he drew up level, casting around a glance that sent the onlookers scurrying. “Why are you restraining this man?”

“This—this—IRISHMAN refuses to stay in the father’s lounge, doctor!” It was the wretched nurse who answered. “He just charged down here, shouting in tongues, insisting —”

“I left explicit instructions that a special exception was to be made for the Frasers,” Dr. Reynolds said crisply, managing to convey absolute authority only by looking politely bemused. “Did you not see the note at the nurses’ station?”

The nurse gave a shocked gurgle of displeasure. Dr. Reynolds smiled coolly at her. “Why don’t you go check in on the gentlemen in the lounge, Nurse Kline, and see Officer Gable back to his station while you’re at it. I’ll personally escort Mr. Fraser to his wife’s room.” And before either could object, Dr. Reynolds had put a light hand on Jamie’s arm and turned them smartly down the hall.

Jamie released a sigh of deep relief, thick and painful from the sudden lump in his throat. “Doctor, Jesus, I canna thank ye en—”
“Your Claire is doing just fine,” the always-intuitive doctor was already saying, setting them a brisk pace. “The baby has decided to start the process a tad early, but not so early as to be worrying or dangerous, if all else goes well. Heartbeat is strong, the head is in the right direction. Mrs. Fraser is about 60% dilated and coming along steadily. Experiencing a great deal of discomfort, but nothing I wouldn’t expect to see in a woman delivering full-term, vaginally, and un-sedated for the first time. They’re both alright,” the man summarized for good measure, stopping at a juncture and clapping Jamie on the shoulder. “Suite 4B-44, down that corridor and then take a right. I’ll be checking in on you both shortly.”

“I thank ye,” Jamie gasped as he shook the doctor’s hand with both his own and then and began sprinting. “Truly, God bless ye!”

True, it had taken no little fortitude and restraint to reconcile all those months ago with the notion that Claire was to have a MALE doctor seeing to her care—seeing to her most intimate care. But the man had slowly gained Jamie’s trust after that first tense visit (he had delivered Brianna, after all); and in that particular moment, (even despite the barbarous instinct that had momentarily bade him tear the man’s throat out for that casual ‘vaginally’), Jamie could have KISSED Dr. Vernon Reynolds with only good will in his heart. In fact, wheeling around the bend, Jamie found himself making a mental note to send the man some monstrously extravagant gift, after all was said and done.

4B-40…
4B-41…
4B-42…
4B-43…

He burst through the door of 4B-44 and—

“—JAMIE!”

He flung himself toward the bed and got his arms around her. “I’m here,” he gasped out, kissing her cheeks and mouth, “Lord, I’m so sorry—I’m here, Sassenach.”

She was fitted out in a cloth smock, her face red and slick with sweat and absolutely broken with emotion as she touched his face and grasped at him, gulping air. “I thought—you would—miss—”

“Not for the world or anything in it,” he promised, leaning his head against hers and running his thumb over her clammy cheek. “Though with the traffic and all, I feared—Och, now, breathe slow wi’ me, Sassenach, aye?” She was having trouble catching her breath amid the agitation, and that scared him enough to force his own faculties into submission. “….Aye, just like that….Good, lass….You’re alright, mo chridhe,” he murmured, “…We’re alright….”

Eyes closed, held close, they breathed, long and slow, and they settled into peace, or as much as could be managed with the machines chirruping the nurses coming and going.

“Bree?” Claire suddenly demanded, looking wildly around.

“Wi’ the Harpers, for now, and Marian promised to call Penelope and arrange things. But Sassenach, will ye tell me, how did it happen? When Marian said ye’d called for an Ambulance—”

“My water broke while I was asleep,” she said shakily, squeezing his hand. “I woke up right as the surge came and with it these—” she shuddered, “—HUGE full-force contractions and it scared me so badly, and… When I got myself up there was blood on the mattress.”
She closed her eyes and clutched him fiercely, and he knew exactly why that sight should have led her to call the Ambulance at once. “Ye did exactly right.” He kissed her temple before drawing back and looking her in the eye. “But the only thing that matters is ye got here, and Dr. Reynolds says the babe is just fine. All is well.”

“Yes,” she repeated as though to convince herself, “all is JEEESUS-H-ROOS—AGHHH—”

“CLAIRE?!?!”

Her entire body had thrown itself into a seizing, contorting spasm in the space of a single moment. She was crying out in great pain, her grip on his hand now tripled and getting stronger. He gripped back, completely undone with panic and not having a single clue what to do. “What can—Call for the doctor!” he demanded of the nurse at the other side of the room.

“No need, she’s alright,” the woman said reassuringly. “Just a little contraction, is all, nothing to worry about.”

“Why don’t YOU come bloody try it, if it’s so LITTLE?” Claire suddenly snarled, glaring at the woman through the pain like a beast straight from the gates of hell.

“Oh, I’ve had three of my own and that’s plenty,” the woman said cheerily with a grin at Jamie, completely nonplussed. “But I’ll go give Dr. Reynolds an update all the same and be back in just a few minutes.”

Claire growled something shocking after her as the door closed, and despite the fear and the absolute shock of witnessing what just one ‘little’ Contraction was doing to her, Jamie burst out laughing and even Claire grinned, though all mirth vanished almost at once as Claire’s back arched and she hissed, groaning and squeezing her face tight in pain.

Then, just as suddenly as the attack had come, it abated, and Claire fell back fully on the pillow, gasping and spent.

“Dear Holy God,” Jamie swore, laying gentle fingertips on her brow and her shoulder. “That was —God, Claire…”

“I’m alright.” HE wasn’t. He was absolutely terrified, but she squeezed his hand with a weak smile. “Remind me again why it is I wanted to do this without sedation?”

“Damned if I ken,” he said sincerely.

In the serene green-painted walls of Dr. Reynolds’ office months before, it had seemed patently and abundantly obvious that of course, Claire should not be placed into a death-like state, now or ever, but certainly not with the bairn inside her. Now, anything that could spare her that kind of pain seemed absolutely and imminently necessary.

“Too late to do anything about it now,” she said, anticipating his next line of thought. She winced sharply and Jamie jumped. “No, it’s not another one. Ian’s just kicking a lass while she’s down,” she groaned with a weak smile, rubbing her belly. “Get on those ‘how to be a gentleman’ lessons pronto when he gets here, alright?”

Ian. Lord, in all the worry over Claire in her pain, it had been easy to overlook the reason for it all, the worry for him, too. Lord, that he might be safe.

But he managed to rasp out a bark of a laugh, keeping up the buoyant hope and gripping her hand overtop the same spot. “Straightaway.”
He had once told Claire that he was glad that they mightn’t ever have children, for he wouldn’t wish her to be subjected to such pain and danger.

*I can bear pain myself,* he had said, holding her close at Lallybroch, his heart secretly breaking despite his noble (and no less honest) declaration, *but I couldn’t bear yours. That would take more strength than I have.*

It *did* take more strength than he had. Far, *far* more.

He knew it was a hard birth even without having personally witnessed one before. The *Contractions* were absolutely nothing compared with what ripped through Claire once Dr. Reynolds had her pushing in good earnest. *To see her thus subjected, to see her in such excruciating pain*…

Jamie coaxed and soothed and begged her to breathe, but God, there wasn’t a damned thing he could truly do other than bear witness to her agony. A fitting atonement, in the end, he reflected.

*Jesus,* how he scorned those men sitting drinking coffees in the lounge. How could any man sit within a stone’s throw of his woman going through such anguish and CHOOSE to lay about and smoke rather than be by her side? …True, even in his own time, it was rare for a man to be present during the birth, but even so! It made his blood boil for the cowardice of men to always be hiding from their wives’ pain.

No, as much as it tore his heart out to hear her screams and to *feel* each wave of pain that coursed through her, it was his duty and honor and privilege to hold her, speak what words he could to her, pray what prayers he could utter, all at her side.

Hours passed, *HOURS* of this torture in Claire’s body, and he truly didn’t know how she could withstand it. She was strong and fit, and made of tougher fiber than any other woman he’d encountered, but Jamie didn’t know if even he *could* have borne the like for so long a period of time. The babe seemed to be tearing her apart from the inside, and his fear for the both of them was so acute as to drive him mad as the evening darkened.

Oh, but at last, Claire’s cries and the doctor’s directions rose up together in a massive crescendo of sound, her body seeming to ripple as though ready to shatter.

“One more push, Claire,” the doctor shouted with the kind of command that won battles, “NOW — *hard as you can*—”

That final scream was the sound of hell itself.

Then, the world shifted, and those next seconds were perfect and eternal.

A whoosh of breath and liquid and a great, grating gasp and Claire’s entire body seemed to collapse.

Sounds of excited triumph; the doctor moving quickly to the table at the end of the room.

*A little boy!* someone proclaimed.

Claire was prostrate with the sudden relief of deliverance, her head lolling on his shoulder, back heaving against his chest. She was beaming, though, faint laughter pouring from her throat even as she struggled to keep her eyes open. “*Jamie*…”

“Oh lass,” Jamie cupped her cheek and held her close against him, his incredible, strong wife. “He’s
arrived,” he gasped, “Ian’s—”

An uncanny dread struck them both and they straightened to look where the doctor and nurses were huddled. Their murmurs crossed the room and struck like bullets though all their backs were turned, hunched over the babe.

“What’s amiss?” Jamie demanded at once, leaping to his feet. “Is he alright?”

“—cyanosis soon—”

“—Call NICU—”

“He can’t breathe?” Claire’s voice was a shrill scream and Jamie’s chest seemed to cave in. “He can’t—?”

“CALL NICU, NOW!” Reynolds bellowed again, oblivious to anything else, and his team went running.

“No—no, no, no—” Claire was utterly dissolving. He fell toward her, words completely failing him. He covered and wrapped her in his arms, that he might shield her. “Jamie,” she pleaded in a cracked, sobbing whisper, her fingers shaking uncontrollably on his neck. “Jamie…Please….”

I canna, he tried to say, but he couldn’t even do that. He couldn’t save his child. He could do nothing except hold her as she began to wail, a sound the like of which he’d never heard before, that cut him open to the marrow.

He would bear this for the both of them. He would wrap his body around this pain and HE would carry it.

Please, God,

Do anything you wish to me. Send me to the war, take my sight, take ME, NOW, but don’t take him.

Spare our son.

And then Ian Henry Fergus Beauchamp Fraser let forth a cry to wake the spirits.

The group was still huddled together, but their voices were soft and easy with laughter and calm over the heart-rending cries of the babe.

“He’s alright,” said one of the nurses, running over with eyes intensely earnest and putting a hand on Claire’s shoulder. “Screaming is good—VERY good! He’s okay.”

Claire closed her eyes and covered her face, her entire body shaking with silent sobs of devastating relief. Jamie kept his hands on her, but his eyes fixed on the group seeing to the child, his pounding heart still refusing to believe.

Reynolds suddenly boomed a great, muffled laugh. “I just remembered your big sister’s birth day, little guy! Scaring the living daylights out of people from day one must run in the family!” A murmur of low words to a nurse, then he spoke again in a soothing baritone, carefully pitched loud enough for all to hear, “Yeah, you’re alright, buddy….Got your breath now, and everything else is looking good. Just give us another minute to get you cleaned up and we’ll get you right over to Mom and Dad, okay?”
Jamie all but collapsed into Claire, then, surrendering to weep with her, just for a time. Neither of them spoke. The relief and the joy was too great, but they each knew what their Heart was thinking, was feeling. He kissed her lips. She touched his cheek.

“Mr. Fraser?” Reynolds said suddenly, his voice no longer muffled.

Jamie jumped to his feet, staggering a bit and running a sleeve across his eyes. The good doctor still had his mask on, but his eyes were smiling as he held out the blanket-wrapped bundle. “Would you like the honor of introducing this little guy to your wife?”

Honor. The good doctor had not the faintest idea of just how great was the honor, the joy, the exquisite gift of reaching down and lifting his newborn child into his arms.

“Ian…” Jamie wept, gasping in great heaving breaths as he pressed his cheek to his son’s forehead, as he kissed him. “Tha gaol agam ort, Iain, a bhailich.”

The tiny lad was red all over and screaming inconsolably, his arms windmilling about, untucking the blanket in which he’d been wrapped. Jamie felt the blades cleave his heart to see those bitty wee fists shaking in terrified abandon, to hear his son’s cries, so utterly desolate and lost, with no hope—

“Dinna fash, a chuisle,” Jamie begged as he turned toward the bed, staring rapt into the boy’s face, sheltering him from the harsh Electric lights with his hand. “It’s alright, aye? Everything’s alright, now. You’re going to meet your Mam, and—” He could barely speak, but he managed to smile, his heart broken with loving them. “—and she’s going to make your life—absolutely wonderful, I promise."

And if picking Ian up in his own arms had been a gift beyond imagining, laying him down into Claire’s and hearing that exquisite sound of love escape her as she cradled him was—everything.

“Hello, little darling….” Claire choked out in barely a whisper. She curled her body over her son. “I’m so glad to meet you.” She brought him up close to her face and kissed him again and again as he cried, letting her own tears bless him. “I love you, Ian,” she breathed, “…Oh, sweetheart…. Mummy loves you so much….”

Without taking her eyes away, she pulled down the neck of her gown to give the child her breast, guiding him with an expert hand. The babe’s cries silenced at once as he latched on, and her sharp gasp of surprise and delight echoed in the sudden silence. Her soft, tearful laughter as she beamed down at him, nourishing him, speaking love over him —

“Jamie? Jamie?” Claire was saying, touching his arm urgently. “Are you alright, love?”

He had gone to his knees beside the bed, weeping so brokenly it was physical pain to keep any sound from escaping and disturbing this peace.

Something had healed within him, to see a child at her breast, something so deeply broken and scarred in his heart that he’d thought it a permanent part of him. The gnarled edges had blazed with light, leaving scarcely a trace behind.

Without a word, she took his hand and pulled him up beside her onto the bed. He tried to say her name—to ask? to tell? He didn’t know for sure, but it didn’t matter. Claire’s kiss on his mouth. Claire’s soft syllables, crooning to him, and his cheek cradled against her shoulder. Her hand reaching for his, the one she’d healed, bringing it to cup Ian’s head against her breast. Those things were sure. Those things he would remember until the day he died.
“I’ll bet the nuns LOVED you.”

Jamie jumped, startled out of his stone-like state. “Nuns?” he asked of the nurse, dumbfounded...or rather asked as best he could through the great yawn that overtook him without warning the moment he opened his mouth.

The woman laughed at him, which gave him enough time to regain his composure and apologize profusely for his rudeness. “Ye caught me by surprise,” he finished lamely.

“Well, that’s what I was getting at!” she said. “The nuns at my school were INTENSE, and you had to sit up straight and stay focused, or you’d get the whap! with a ruler across the knuckles, or worse. I’ll bet you were the star pupil, though, the way you’ve been standing straight and still all this time.”

Jamie relaxed and gave her a tired grin. “I didna have any nuns in my own schooling, I’m afraid.”

“Military, then?”

“Aye, just so,” he said, impressed. “How did ye ken that?”

“You’ve just got that well-trained look about you, ya know?” Her humor softened into evident concern. “Honestly though, you should go sleep for a bit or get a bite to eat, at least.”

“Thank ye verra kindly, Nurse...Thompson,” he said, reading her name pin (and in his beleaguered state, feeling inordinately flustered over having just peered at her bosom like a lecher), “but I’ll do.”

He glanced immediately back through the glass, reassuring himself that Ian was still there. Aye, second row on the left, asleep in his tiny bonnet and swaddled in blankets. All well. Unless...was he staying too still? How long had it been since the lad had moved or kicked? How often were new weans supposed to wake up? How—

“He’s okay, don’t worry,” Nurse Thompson said, following his line of sight. “Vitals are great, and he’s sleeping like a champ.”

Jamie exhaled and smiled sheepishly down at his shoes, realizing how much of a simpleton he must seem. “I find myself overworrit at every turning, tonight.”

She gave him a knowing smile. “First-time dad, huh?”

“Nay,” he admitted, “we’ve a daughter as well; she’s three in November.” Knowing well the implication of the question, Jamie offered, “I was away—at the war, when she was born, and a good deal of time thereafter.”

“Ahh,” she said, turning back to the glass as well, her voice soft with understanding. “So it’s an even bigger day for you, then.”

_Those minutes with Claire just after the birth, with the three of them joined in absolute peace and love as Ian nursed for the first time, had been nothing short of perfect._

_There had too soon come the moment, though, when Reynolds had stepped closer to say that ‘while all seemed well, they would both need—No, Mr. Fraser, nothing specific to worry about as of yet—He’d only feel better if both Mrs. Fraser and the baby received a more thorough medical_
examination.’ There was the afterbirth to attend to, of course, and then mother and son would need to sleep in order to properly heal and get back their strength.

Only concern for their safety could have made Jamie pull his hands from them, but in fact, he found himself gritting his teeth in frustration at how SLOWLY everyone seemed to be moving. If there were medical problems to discover with HIS wife and HIS child, these people needed to be moving with all haste!

Lost in his angst, he was completely taken aback when Claire suddenly grabbed his sleeve and said anxiously, “Go with him?”

The nurse had just taken the babe from her arms and Claire’s eyes were wide with worry of the impending separation. “Might I?” Jamie had asked the nurse, hardly daring to hope and already dreading another confrontation with hospital security (for he’d do whatever was necessary to heed Claire’s request, Nurse Kline be damned). But to his relief, he soon learned there was a large window that opened out onto the newborn nursery where he might stand and watch over the bairn as long as he wished.

He’d scarcely moved all the while, standing there overseeing every single action involving care of his son. The boy was washed and wrapped; weighed; checked and prodded, notes made about him on papers and forms. Jamie was aware of the progresses of his heart: racing when Ian woke and cried, quieting again to see the nurses come at once to tend him, Nurse Thompson among them.

“Look.” The woman crossed her arms and gave him a very stern, unnervingly Claire-like look. “You’ve been standing here for what....six hours?”

It had been the stroke of nine o’clock when Ian was born. Glancing at his Wristwatch, he found that she wasn’t far wrong. Still, he smiled and tried to make light of the situation while still making it clear he had no intention whatsoever of budging from this spot.

“Here’s the thing, though,” she cut him off neatly, gesturing through the glass. “Your little peanut there is snoozing away. Your wife should be doing the same, and so when they wake up in a few hours, they’ll be all rested and fresh while they’re getting to know each other.” She tilted her head, a master wheedler at work. “Stop me if I’m wrong, but I would imagine those are moments you’d like to be awake for, right?”

Fair.

“And how about when your daughter arrives to meet her little brother? How much of a lovely memory will that be if you can’t keep your eyes open for it?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but then closed it and laughed a bit, rubbing a hand over his face. “Aye, you’ve maybe a point.”

“I most definitely do,” she said with authority. “Go on now, find your wife’s room and get some shut-eye.”

“I shall,” he promised, relenting at last.

“Let me or someone know if you need anything, like a blanket or pillow, okay?”

He nodded assent, then added, “My wife always says I’m stubborn as rocks, and I canna just say she’s wrong. I truly thank ye for the talking-to.”

“Not my first rodeo,” she said with a smile. “Had a new dad just last month who stood for so long
and was fool enough to LOCK HIS FOOL KNEES and ended up getting admitted to the fifth floor for a concussion!”

Jamie laughed, thanked her again, made to turn, then faltered, looking back through the glass to where Ian slept.

*I should stay wi’ him—I shouldna leave my son...*

She was already shooing him on his way, but Nurse Thompson’s voice was earnest and solemn as she promised, “I’ll take good care of little Ian.”

And fact that the woman kent the boy’s name, among more than twenty newborns under her care—

That allowed him to make his way through the halls with his fears—for the moment, at least—at bay.

She was so lovely, in the faint light from the window. Her hair had been washed, he saw, and the fresh, soft curls framed her face.

He felt a deep, aching tenderness pulling at him in watching her sleep. She’d gone through hell and come through it in safety, she and the bairn, God be praised. *This woman...she was his own heart; and thrice, now, she’d given birth and given him an entirely new heart,* without any diminishment of the original. The wonder and love and *miracle* in that fact.....

*Sleep,* he reminded himself. In his haze of exhaustion, he spent a comically-long space of time looking from the bed, to the chair, and back again. He didn’t wish to wake her. Lord knew, she needed to sleep after her ordeal; but he couldn’t bear to be apart from her, either.

Silently, he removed his shoes and slipped onto the bed, curling up next to her on his side. Sleep tugged at him almost at once, but he couldn’t resist kissing her cheek and putting his arm over her to hold her close in sleep.

“*I love you, Claire.*”

She didn’t wake, nor did she need to. Her love was on him all the same.
Ian (III)

July 22, 1951

“He minds me of ye, Sassenach.”

I’d been dozing, but my soul was already glowing with the sweetest warmth by the time my eyes actually fell upon the sight: Jamie at my elbow by the hospital bed, swaying gently from side to side, beaming down at the sleeping bundle held so tenderly and carefully in his arms.

“Of me?” I clarified, latching onto prim mock-indignance—I didn’t bloody want to cry yet—AGAIN. “I do hope you’re not insinuating that my face is all red and scrunched?”

“Only when you’re fashed wi’ me, AND when ye first waken in the morn, all drooling AND—Only joking,” he laughed, as I mimed chucking something at his head. A moment later and, like a magnet, his gaze returned to Ian’s face, his hand coming up to cup the downy head. “Nay,” he crooned, “his hair is like yours, I mean.”

I craned my neck to better see, but of course I’d noticed the same. No visible curl, as of yet, but decidedly brown. “Many babies are born with dark hair to start, you know,” I felt obliged to say. “It might very well grow in as a new color, after a few weeks.”

Jamie glanced up, looking, to my amusement, worried. “Was that how it was with Brianna?”

“No,” I admitted, the memory bittersweet and wonderful. “Sweet little wisps of red, even from the first.”

That wide mouth turned up at once into a broad grin. “Good!”

I felt oddly touched, but decades of intense hatred of the drab-brown curly fate some trickster god had dealt me compelled the question, “Wouldn’t you rather have your children look like you, all other things being equal?”

“It hardly makes a difference one way or another, does it?” he said affably. “It makes me smile to see wee Bree, true...but that’s more that she reminds me of Willie and my mother.” I watched as he ran his thumb slowly backward over the tiny curve of the baby’s skull. “But to have a child who looks like my wife...my nighean donn....” He bent and tenderly kissed the soft brown scraggle, once, twice. “That’s a new kind of happiness altogether, aye?...Mm,” he hummed in sudden, happy inspiration, “I only hope he has your eyes, as well.”

“Well, we’ll see in a few weeks when Rip van Winkle there deigns to keep them open for more than a moment.” Although, maybe not, I reminded myself. With Bree, it had taken at least a week to discern any distinctive color, any glimpse prior to that hinting at only a vague, watery black as Ian’s now did. Even if he did copy his Da and sister, many babies born with blue eyes grow to have them shift color over time. “Don’t you worry, little Winky,” I crooned for Ian’s benefit, “we’ll love you no matter which color you choose.”

Jamie nestled onto the bed beside me, carefully keeping his arms steady so as not to jostle the tiny sleeper. As tired as I was (I had bloody well given birth not sixteen hours ago), the sight of James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser holding his son—our son— took my breath away. It was...I studied his face, trying to voice exactly what it was that I saw there—
—and then Ian stirred and Jamie froze. It was like clockwork, actually, every muscle going alert and poised in a blink as though awaiting orders.

A moment later, though, and the baby was only giving a little chirping yawn, tiny fingers fanning out as he stretched, then slumped back into a dead sleep.

Jamie’s shoulders sagged, too, and I watched—rapt—to see him sigh and smile, catching his bottom lip between his teeth, as though he ought not to feel so very much joy but neither would he give it up for all the world. It was no more full of love, this joy, I reflected, no more life-alteringly exquisite than the first time he saw and held Brianna, more than a year ago; and in fact, memory of that first meeting still made my heart squeeze and tremble with the sheer magnitude of it. But today’s joy was different, untempered by wasted years or the fingers of guilt; by the memory of broken hearts or emptiness. This was unhindered, untrammeled joy: new life, new love, without caveat.

Jamie had loosened the blankets and had his hand laid flat against the bared chest, easily spanning hip to breastbone. “I canna believe how....tiny he is,” he murmured, his brows drawn in actual astonishment, watching, feeling the rise and fall of Ian’s chest.

“He’ll grow,” I promised, running a knuckle down Ian’s cheek and resting my head lightly on Jamie’s shoulder, “don't worry.”

He glanced up and breathed a soft laugh. “No, it's no’ that. I ken he’ll grow faster than we can manage to keep up wi’ him. But now, he’s….just so small...”

The wonder in his eyes was a puzzle I couldn’t quite solve. “You've held newborns before, haven’t you?”

“Aye....Bitty wee things, all, but our Ian, he’s…”

I watched as the thoughts settled and took shape, his face the glass one, today.

“I can hold him firm in one hand...”

He didn’t take his eyes from Ian as he spoke, slowly, entranced. His voice was as soft as a whisper, but clear and resonant as a plucked string, so deep and low that I felt a chill pass through me.

“...and yet he’s already got within him whatever it is that he’s meant to be. Not even a day old, and even now he’s maybe...us, in some way... and....He’s scarcely begun his life but we already love him more than our own....” Jamie’s head moved slowly back and forth, blinking hard. “...And he doesna even ken it yet, none of it... He’s just sleeping...He’s only our wee son, and that’s..... It’s...”

He couldn't finish.

I could.

“...heaven.”
July 22, 1951

Come now, man: you were the Laird of Broch bloody Tuarach. It wasn’t long ago when you were capable of everything from bringing down foes on the battlefield barehanded to manipulating the workings of Europe’s royal courts. Even in more recent years, you managed to master an Automobile, did you not? For the love of Bride, you can certainly bring yourself to walk to the Elevators.

Jamie did force himself to walk at a more-or-less dignified pace, but he let the foolish grin fly forth unchecked: Bree was here.

It had been only a day since he’d last seen her, but Lord, it seemed an eternity. More than once in that space of time, he’d found himself worrying for her sake. It had been so rushed, those minutes between their talking-to beneath the oak tree and when he’d entrusted her to the Harpers before fairly leaping into the Car to get to Claire’s side. He could scarcely remember how he had left things between him and his daughter. Had she spent the time apart fretting that he was still angry with her over the business with the climbing?

He walked faster. She had been fine, Marian (and later Penelope) had assured him in the times when he’d phoned, no tantrums or tears; but he still could scarcely wait another moment to have his little girl back in his arms again. For, full and complete as the experience of Ian’s birth had been, holding the wean made Jamie feel Bree’s absence all the more; a deep, growing ache in his wame, more noticeable with every passing minute. He needed to have both of his children there together, to kiss and hold them, to see both at once. A Dhia, came the stunned, joyful thought as he accelerated around the final corner: a father of two, Fraser...

Mrs. Byrd was just stepping out of the Elevator, Bree’s hand in hers, and Jamie could have burst with sheer joy at the sight, except that the minute his daughter laid eyes on him, she burst first: into tears.

He closed the distance between them in a matter of moments and caught her up into his arms, clutching her tight against his chest in a terrible panic of love and worry. “Bree, lass?”

She had thrown her arms around his neck at once, and he could feel the whole of her little body shaking as she sobbed out something that sounded like ‘Da.’

“I’m here.” He cupped her head. “Shhhh, dinna fash, lass, it’s alright….What’s the matter, a leannan?”

Penelope was apparently as bewildered as he. “Goodness! Where did that—She was quiet all morning, but I didn’t know something was—Oh, there, there, honey,” she crooned, coming close to stroke Bree’s back. “Tell us what’s the matter, sweet pea.”

Even with an inconsolable toddler on his shoulder, Jamie was filled with such tenderness and gratitude toward this dear woman. He and Claire truly couldn’t work at their hours and pace of life without Penelope’s endless dedication, a fact that would be all the more true in future, with two wee ones in her charge. To her credit, she was no cold, cruel governess like those in the stories: ‘Grannie Byrd’ was truly a member of the family. Jamie managed to bend down and kiss her on the cheek and express some of the depth of his gratitude with words, even over Bree’s tears. He truly hoped
they never had occasion to learn what they would do without Penelope Byrd.

“Oh, you won’t have to, if I have anything to say about it,” she promised, patting Bree’s shaking back, then casting about a bit sheepishly. “I hate to run off and leave you without knowing what’s troubling her, but...”

“But you’ve a wee grandson to meet,” he said with a smile, and for a moment, the look on her dear, weathered face made him wonder if he would have to manage two distraught ladies crying on his shoulder in a moment.

Still, as Penelope—glowing—made her way down the hall to find Claire and Ian, there was only Bree; only his daughter, sobbing her entire heart out.

“Alright, now,” he murmured in Gaelic, finding an empty chair on a quiet side-corridor and settling down into it. Surely, this was only the relief of an unaccustomed separation ended at last, he reasoned, and that would be soothed easily enough. “It’s alright, wee love....Cry all ye must...It’s alright, mo chridhe....”

He closed his eyes and held her tightly, a lump in his throat making him feel as though he would join her in crying at any moment. She just felt so big in his arms, so solid and full of lively energy, and all at once, he wanted to hold her there forever and keep her from growing up—that she might stay his wee one, always. “I love you, Brianna Ellen,” he murmured, finding it was the only thing that could hold the weight of all he felt.

What Brianna said in response had Jamie’s eyes flying open wide, and he bolted up so straight and so suddenly that Bree detached from his neck and would have toppled backward. “What was it ye said?”

Her face was red and wet and swollen, her expression the exact twin to her voice: wretched and genuinely crushed as she repeated: “...Love Beeyin more—th’n—me?”

“NO,” he swore violently. He saw her jump and forced himself to lower his voice. “That is absolutely not so, Brianna.”

“But—” She rubbed her eyes with both fists, hiccuping and still sobbing. “But them—they—”

“Bree.” He managed to get her to meet his eye again, torn between simple astonishment and anxiety for the state of her heart. “What on earth would make ye think such a thing?”

“Didna’nt MEAN to think one,” she wailed. “People were say—sayin’—”

“Which people? Who, lass?” he pushed.

“Meerin an’— Mister Tom an’ the people.”

“Oh, aye?.... And what did they say to ye?”

“That—” Tears welled up again in force and her words were choked and gasping. “You’re so much happy—’cause of havin’ a—a baby thats a baby-boy for FINALLY, and—and—” She collapsed once more in a heap around his neck. “An’—I—was—sad.”

“Oh, my sweet, wee cub...”

Jamie pulled her as close as he could, and kissed her again and again, her warm head pressed against his cheek. If Marian or Tom had truly made such a comment, he knew it would have been a
completely lighthearted jest that had gotten unfortunately misconstrued. Still, by whatever means, that sense of ‘finally’ had obviously taken root in Bree’s heart, for the feeling behind that word had been deep and true.

“The people didna mean anything by it at all, Bree,” he promised. “It’s just how folk talk sometimes, aye? Some nonsense about how daddies are supposed to like their boys best, and mummies, the girls.”

“Thit’s—It’s...” He felt her sniff, heard the tentative hope. “....it’s a nonsense?”

He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “‘Aye, of course’ it is. Lass, I love your baby brother wi’ all my heart, but there’s no’ a single thing in the world that could make me love YOU less.” She coughed and gulped for air, and Jamie decided that perhaps humor would be of some use. “In fact, your Mum and me quarrel ALL the time about which of us loves ye most.”

She stirred and glowered dubiously up at him from under wet lashes, lips still quivering. “...Who’s....the most one?”

“Both of us.”

“But who?”

“Mum AND Da.”

Bree had trouble not grinning, though she made a valiant effort to stay stoic.

Jamie pressed his good fortune. “And, let’s face it, wee Ian shall—WELL....Can ye keep a secret?”

“Yeah!” she whispered, streaming eyes suddenly wide. “I’m keep it!”

“Only between us, ken....?” Jamie whispered confidentially. “Your wee brother is going to have to work verra, VERRA hard to impress, because his sister is already the best there is.”

“Me’s, the siss-ter?”

“Aye, that’s you.”

She giggled even as a latent tear slid the rest of the way down her cheek. Jamie thumbed it away and kissed the track, serious again. “Truly, Bree: no matter how much we love Ian, your Mum and I canna love you any less, not ever. It isna even possible, do ye hear me?”

She got a deep breath at last and exhaled it, the life coming back to her eyes. “Aye-okay.”

“Aye-okay, indeed.” He kissed her, his heart full. “Shall we go meet your wee brother, then, cub? He’s been asking after ye...”

And her smile—captivating him entirely with the earnest joy and excitement in it—was all the reassurance he needed.
“MUMMY!!!”

Even in the still-foggy and damned painful state of new deliverance, there was the purest and clearest joy in my heart as I reached up to intercept my daughter from Jamie’s arms. “Oh, lovey—” I crushed her tight to my chest and burrowed my face into her hair. “I’m so glad you’re here—I’ve missed you so much.”

“Miss’t you more,” came the muffled reply.

“Oh, I don’t know about that, little smudge,” I murmured, smoothing back her hair and exhaling deeply with the sheer relief and joy of having her near, of knowing she was safe and mine. I found myself noticing the differences of her scent from Ian’s, the knowledge soothing and somehow vital as it settled in my senses. My son. My daughter.

She pushed back against my shoulders, far enough to bestow a sloppy kiss. “Feelin’ all better?”

I grinned, touched. “MUCH bett—”

“Where is-he?”

“What, seeing your Mummy isn’t the whole reason you drove all this way??”

“Wherrrrre?” she insisted, beaming with excitement.

“Here, a leannan.” Jamie, three steps ahead as always, had retrieved the baby from Penelope’s loving embrace and was already at my elbow.

Unswaddled against the heat of the day, Ian seemed even more tiny and fragile. My heart stabbed with a wild, heartbreaking anxiety to see his limbs, so incredibly thin and vulnerable in their cotton suit.

Still, I eased as I felt the warm weight of his head settling securely into the crook of my arm, as I felt the reassuring pressure of Jamie’s hand over mine. “Bree?....This is your little brother.”

Brianna, on her knees, half-facing and half-leaning on me, peered down into Ian’s face....and issued a tiny, inarticulate squeak.

“Can you say hello?” I nudged, watching her intently and grinning like an idiot.

She beamed up at me, then Jamie, and then back down at Ian’s sleeping face....and issued a tiny, inarticulate squeak.

“Can you say hello?” I nudged, watching her intently and grinning like an idiot.

She beamed up at me, then Jamie, and then back down at Ian’s sleeping face, absolutely speechless.

“We’ve two of them now, mo chridhe,” Jamie murmured against my temple, sounds from Penelope’s camera from the other side of the room promising that this moment would be captured forever.

“Two,” I whispered back, my heart unspeakably full, our children there in our arms.

He reached out and softly touched Bree’s cheek. “What do ye think of baby Ian, cub?”
“Beeyin?” Bree, coming out of her rapt reverie, looked at Ian, then gave me a look of half-horrified fascination as though things were suddenly dropping into place. “ACK-shlee he came out y’r tummy?”

I held back most of the laughter, though it was damned difficult, what with Jamie shaking beside me like my own personal earthquake. “He actually did.”

“Wow...” she whispered, looking back to Ian. “Good job, Mummy!” Bree snuggled closer, all but lounging ON the baby in her need to see him up close. “He’s really...all—” A tiny, squealing sigh that might have been ‘cute’.

“He’s beautiful, isn’t he?” I murmured, splitting my gaze between them. “And he’s all new. All ours.”

“I can hold him?”

After a bit of shifting about, we settled at last with Bree between us on the bed and a pillow laid crosswise on her outstretched legs. Carefully, I eased Ian down onto the cushion, his tiny stockinged-feet curled up against her belly.

“Now, mind his head,” Jamie instructed Bree, a protective hand hovering by Ian’s ear just in case. “Ye must always be careful wi’ a wean’s head.”

Bree leveled her father with a look of haughty scorn that would have brought any professionally-trained actor to shame. “I’ll be careful of all him, Daddy.”

Completely oblivious to the laughter from the adults in the room, she returned her attention to her new charge, all serene smiles. “He’s all soft...” Bree ran a finger very gingerly across his cheek, across the full pink lips, pouted in sleep. “...like a blanket.”

“Verra soft indeed,” Jamie murmured, his hand, shifting up ever so slightly to stroke the shocks of downy hair.

“Why’s he sleep?”

I kissed the top of her head, remembering when it, too, could fit easily in my hand. “So he can grow up big and strong like you.”

“Oh...good.” She picked up one of his hands, grinning. “Hi, Beeyin,” she cooed. “....Glad you’re, um...glad you’re been born....”

Jamie’s eyes were the deepest blue I’d ever seen them, crinkled and warm in the midday light of the room as he watched the two of them...then smiled at me.

“We’ll play a lot....You can play wi’ George all you wanna, okay?”

Ian responded to the gracious offer of Bree’s favorite toy rabbit by dreamily searching for milk with his tongue.

“An—” Bree went on, making her overtures with a distinctly Fraser-like solemnity, “—an’—won’t let any snakes bite you. Because love, okay?”

Snakes? I mouthed to Jamie over her head.

Tell ye later, he mouthed back with a grin, and then both of us nearly jumped out of our skins when
Bree GASPED.

“Jees—”

“Wh—”

“He’s ‘wake!!” she whisper-screamed.

And sure enough, Ian Fraser was blinking up at his sister with an expression that could only be described as ‘perplexed’, brows furrowed and mouth in a perfect O of concentration,

All three of us stared down, entranced, as Ian slowly brought his hands up toward his face. The tiny fingers fanned out as he stretched in a great yawn, making us all gasp in unison from delight and love.

“He’s—like a little person!” Bree declared, sounding unsure as to whether to cry or laugh at this revelation; though likely the former, from the happy quaver in her voice. A wonderful human being, this little lass was. My sweet, sweet love.

“He’s watching you, Bree,” I whispered into her ear, a little choked. Ian was intent upon her, in fact, his watery eyes following the slightest of her movements.

“I’m watchin’ him, too,” she said. A promise.

Bree kissed her brother on the forehead. Jamie’s arm came around behind her to encircle my waist. I nuzzled my head against his as I stroked Ian’s hair. We all, even Ian, exhaled as one.

The camera clicked, and it was set in stone. The four of us. Forever.
Beeyin on Board

**July 26th, 1951**

“You know….you can drive faster, darling. I won’t mind one bit.”

Jamie flashed me a brief, dazzling grin before doing absolutely nothing about it save returning his attention to the road.

“Not only would I not mind….” I went on, clearing my throat dramatically, “….I might insist that you go faster than—” I peered at the gauge. “Good Lord, Jamie, TEN miles per hour??”

“Oh, but ‘tis a grand speed,” Jamie said brightly, moving through the next turn with all the haste of a particularly unambitious glacier. “Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach, I’ll do.”

“Well, I might not,” I spluttered, shifting Ian more comfortably in my arms. “At this rate, it’ll be three hours before we get home, and by that time, I’ll have pissed all over the seat!”

“Piss to your heart’s content, my lady,” he said with a courtly flourish of the hand, and damn me, if he wasn’t completely serious. “I’d rather that kind of accident than the other.”

Despite the demands of my bladder, I laughed, and Jamie did too. “I’ll get faster wi’ time, I promise,” he offered of his own accord, looking a little sheepish even as he exerted enormous concentration upon the line of cars before us. “Only, it’s the first time driving wi’ the lad aboard wi’ us and—well—I wish to be cautious, is all.”

“I know, sweetheart.” I laid a hand gently on his leg, squeezing gently and smiling. It was nearing dusk, a treacherous time of day for motorists in any circumstances, so his caution was well-placed. "No matter how long it takes, I’m only glad we’re going home.”

He exhaled with a smile. “Aye, at last.”

Honestly, we had had an easy go of it, all things considered. When Bree was born, she and I had stayed in the hospital for a full two weeks. One was customary, as far as American postpartum care was concerned; the second had been deemed wise by Dr. Reynolds in light of my cesarian incision and Bree’s time in the NICU. I had been more than happy to comply, if it ensured she was safe and well.

With Ian, though—the both of us progressing well, with no complications whatsoever—I had been positively ITCHING to get out of the bloody hospital, and Reynolds, bless him, allowed it after only four days of observed convalescence. “I’ve broken all the customary policies and procedures for the Frasers,” he said with a smile as he initialed and signed the discharge forms, “why not complete the set?”

It was true, too. From Jamie’s presence both during the birth and near-constantly afterward, to my refusal of sedation, to my insistence upon breastfeeding both at once and exclusively, we had caused quite a stir in the normally rigid parameters of the modern maternity ward. God bloody Bless Dr. Reynolds: a man ahead of his time, if ever I met one (and I had, at that).

Jamie had split those four days between the hospital and being home with Bree. Beyond the promised respite from the stresses of the hospital, the greater part of the relief of going home was that we would all be together under the same roof; the four of us, starting to figure out the rhythms of this new life.
“How’s he managing?” Jamie asked as we turned (see: ‘crept’) onto the street leading into our neighborhood.

“Wonderfully.” I lifted Ian up closer to my face and kissed that sweet, brown forelock. “Dreaming away.”

“Good,” Jamie said, his voice warm with a smile as he chanced a few glances at our tiniest passenger. “It perhaps bodes well, that he sleeps so sound and so often, aye?”

“Let’s hope so…..What say you, Ian?” I asked of our son (had my talk-to-infants voice always been two octaves higher, I wondered?). “Does this mean you’re going to be kind and let Da and Mummy get their sleep?”

Ian grunted and slowly covered his face with both hands as if to say, Jesus H. Christ, you lot, hush and leave me to it.

“Best get used to noise, little wink,” I murmured, leaning my head against his and closing my eyes in contentment. “Your family is quite the lively bunch.”

“YOU’RE HOMMMMMMME!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Home, indeed!”

Jamie set down the bags, closed the door behind us, and caught a pajama-ed Bree up into his arms.

“Home AND gonna STAY home, aye?”

“Aye,” Jamie and I promised in unison as Penelope came in to hug and kiss and fawn and be embraced heartily in return.

Bree leaned over at a ridiculous angle, trying to peer down from Jamie’s arms into mine. “Hi-Beeyin!” she squealed.

Grinning, I scooped up Ian’s hand onto my finger and mimed a little waving motion. “Say, ‘Hi, Bree!’”

Brianna giggled insanely, then demanded excitedly of her brother, “Come see the house? Wanna come see it??”

“Oh, of course he does. Why don’t you show him around?” I said softly, hoping she would take the hint and lower her volume.

“THIS ONE—” our daughter bellowed, grandly gesturing to the living room as we ambled into it, “—IS—Um—uhhh…..” She furrowed her brows, then leaned close to Jamie’s ear and whispered loudly, “What’s-this-room name’s is, Da?”

“Sitting room,” he whispered back, lips twitching.

“SIT-IN ROOM!” she declared triumphantly to the baby without missing a beat. “We sit on’na chairs and play and stuff! An’ Mummy draws on books at’the desk!”

And in such a fashion, the tour progressed, with Bree giving scattered commentary on each room in the house. As for her brother…Well, Ian’s appreciation of this exclusive inside-look for his benefit
amounted to the occasional doleful blink and—as Bree was extolling the virtues of the back garden—an urgent grunting that presaged a nappy-change would be needed very soon indeed.

After we had bade goodnight to Mrs. Byrd, Ian and I retreated to the bedroom, where I laid him on his back while I got changed into my nightclothes. LORD, did it feel wonderful to be in cotton that didn’t smell of the hospital.

He was wide-awake as I changed him, making little snuffling sounds and starting to look around at his surroundings with more precise intention. I crooned love and nonsense to him as I worked, praising his efforts and making ridiculous faces in response to his.

From across the house, I could hear the sounds of Jamie (Bree in tow) locking down the house for the night, the ritual concluding with a familiar, weighty, “Bedtime now, a leannan.”

For once, Bree didn’t immediately respond with bargains and pleas. Rather, I heard a gasp of delight and the pattering sounds of bare feet dancing and jumping in anticipation. “Essighted for Beeyin’s can sleep in MY room!?”

A suppressed laugh, then a slight groan as Jamie bent or squatted down. “Cub, we’ve been over this many a time already, aye? Ian’s got his wee crib in Mummy and Da’s room, and that’s where he’ll sleep.”

“But—Da!—Listen, m’okay?—He likes it better, my room!”

“Is that so?”

“Uh-huh! He saw it an’ he liked it!”

I snorted a laugh as I finished pinning the nappy. “Your sister is going to speak for you *quite* a lot over the years, sweetheart. I can guarantee it.”

“Be that as it may, Bree,” came Jamie’s stern rumble from the hall, “he’s too small, aye? When he’s old enough, he’ll most certainly share your room, but he needs to stay close to your Mummy for now, so that when he wakes in the night, he can—”

Even from the next room, I could hear the sniffing and grumbling, the spluttered syllables that meant a tantrum was coming on in force. Shifting Ian up onto my shoulder, I swept into the hall to save the day. “Would you like Ian to sit with you while you have your story, pumpkin?”

And just like that, she was cheering in triumph.

Bree picked *The Poky Little Puppy* as that night’s story, and Ian, bless him, stayed awake for nearly the entire recitation. He lay on his back in the middle of Bree’s bed, blinking up at the ceiling and making a whole array of precious, soft squeaking sounds, much to the delight of his sister. She lay on her belly near his head, chin propped on her elbows, watching his every wiggle in blissful absorption. Jamie’s voice was soothing and warm as he read, his hand just as comforting in mine as we perched on the edge of the bed, watching our little ones watching one another.

As the ever-vague moral conclusion of the story was about to sound forth, though, Ian began to cry. Well, no, it could be called ‘crying’ only for the first second; after that, the tiny little body was emitting screams loud and piercing enough to wake the dead.

“Oh, darling….” I leaned forward and touched his cheek with a fingertip, not surprised to see him root at once, seeking a nipple. “No need to cry, my love,” I murmured. “We’ll get you sorted, Ian, don’t worry.”
Bree had bolted to her knees at once at the sound and was staring down wide-eyed at the squalling, red thing that had been her brother a moment ago. “Wha—What’ssa matter wi’ him?” she demanded.

“He’s just telling us that he’s hungry,” I explained, preparing to lift Ian up and take him in the other room.

Before I could manage it, though, Jamie abruptly pulled on our still-joined hands and was helping me up off the bed.

“Jamie?” I hissed as I tried to get my feet under me, “—what in the—?”

“Verra sweet dreams to ye, cub,” Jamie said significantly to Bree. “We’ll see ye in the morning, aye?”

“Wh—” Her head snapped up in alarm. “Where you goin’??”

“Ye wanted have your brother stay in your room….” We were at the doorway, Jamie’s hand poised over the lightswitch and his brows raised. “…..did ye no’?”

“Ummmmm….Well….” Bree looked absolutely, hilariously helpless as she blinked between us the baby, who was playing his vociferous role to perfection. Jamie’s arm was around my waist, and I could feel his belly shaking with laughter.

Brianna Fraser did her very best to save face as she fixed her gaze upon Ian and said casually, “He can…maybe sleep wi’ you an’ Mum an’ Da ‘til, ummmm he’s…..” Her eyes flicked up to us. “….um-til he stops bein’ hungry?”

Jamie grinned, I giggled, and we both came forward at once to shower her with a thousand kisses each. “That sounds a grand plan, a leannan.”
The Difference

Chapter Summary

Pillowtalk from that first night at home with the baby

That same night

“Are ye alright, Sassenach?”

“Mnhmm.” My sleepy sound resonated through his chest and thrummed back against my ear, bringing me into greater consciousness. “Why?”

“You’re still awake.”

“As are you.” I turned onto my side and snuggled against him once more, throwing an arm over his bare chest.

He laughed a soft, low affirmative. “Can I get ye anythin’?”

“No,” I yawned, “’m’fine... Just can’t seem to fall fully asleep.” I laid a kiss on his breast.

“Enjoying this too much.”

Both his arms wrapped more securely around me. Peace.

As much as I still felt huge and sore and foreign in most parts of my body, it was heaven beyond imagining to be laying in our bed, NOT pregnant, and with both children asleep. The rest of the evening had been a blur of feeding, nappy changing, the bliss of a hot (but too-brief) shower, squalls from Ian to be soothed, a glass of water for Bree to be fetched, a hasty sandwich to be scarfed down, another glass of water, another squall, and finally, bed.

There we’d lain for an hour or more in the quiet, just holding each other, healing the ache that the separation of the past week had occasioned. Not that we would trade a single moment of the past week—we had our son, now, and that was everything and more. Still, it was restorative, vital to touch one another again, held tight together in peace with no distractions.

“I dinna think I’m wrong in recalling,” Jamie said suddenly, absently stroking my hair, “that folk didna fuss over new bairns so verra much back in our time. My time.”

Like a flash, hurt barreled up within me, bordering on rage, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from snapping back in indignation. I closed my eyes. Jesus H. Christ, I’d forgotten the intensity of those postpartum mood swings. My throat was tight as though (or no, because) I was about to cry, and it showed. “Have I been fussing?”

“No! No, no, forgive me, lass.” His complete lack of hesitation eased the knot. “Even if ye were, I’d no’ blame ye for it.” A warm squeeze and a kiss on my forehead served to soothe my irrational ire entirely. “But nay, it was all the pamphlets and warnings and such, I meant.”
“Ah. Don’t blame you, there.”

It hadn’t been lost on me, today, how tight and grave Jamie’s face had gone as the maternity discharge staff conducted their seminar of infant-care advice. ‘Advice,’ forsooth: for over an hour, they’d delivered lectures and preemptive scolding over all the errors we—he, being the implied subtext, with many a censorious glare cast in his direction—were evidently going to make, not to mention all the gory details of the harm that would come to the baby when we did. By the end of it, Jamie—who had entered the room rosy-flushed and summer-tanned—was positively pallid.

“I tell ye true, Sassenach,” he said, “I didna ken a tenth of all the things that might go wrong from the smallest negligence—That there are so many wrong ways to lay him down to sleep, or times and ways in which to feed him, or sounds and coughs for which I must be on alert—That he might suffocate or suffer God-knows-what terrible illness or pain or lasting damage unknowingly at my hand. It’s all....It terrifies me.” The tone of his voice told me far more than the words themselves.

“It is a lot,” I agreed, rubbing his arm. “It’ll be an adjustment, but there’s no shame in that.”

I felt, rather than saw him cock his head to look down at me. “It doesna frighten you, then?”

“Maybe it ought to. Well, it does. I don’t think there will ever be a day when raising a child doesn’t bring worries and grey hairs. But on the whole, no, I’m not afraid.”

“A mother’s gift, I suppose,” he mused. “How I envy ye that calm, Claire—that it comes so naturally.”

“Hardly!” I laughed ruefully. “Would that it did.”

“No? Oh!” I felt him stir. “But of course it will all be easier for ye this time around, seeing as how ye’ve done it all before wi’ wee Bree.”

“Well, experience helps, certainly, but—Even if I were—What I mean is, even if you had—Oh!” I sighed in frustration, my words feeling slow and stupid in my current state.

He was about to say something, then stopped.

“...When Bree was born,” I said at last, tracing slow patterns on the planes of his abdomen to avoid his eye, “It was over a year before I found Penelope, you know? There was a minder who I’d hire for an evening or two a month when I was on the verge of breaking down, but I—” I struggled to keep my voice under control. “I had isolated myself from all forms of connection and help, at that point, so....It was just me.”

Jamie tilted my face upward and brought his mouth to mine. He knew.

“It’s the way I wanted it, I told myself,” I continued when we separated again. “It was worth it for my independence, for the life I wanted us to have, but God, it....Forget ‘scared’—Every goddamn moment, I was petrified that I’d make a mistake and end up hurting her. I went into a dead panic every time she so much as cried or spat up. There were so many nights, for months and months and months, that I—I just—would sit alone and shake and sob (even when all was well with her!), because I was just so bloody afraid that I’d do something, that day, or the next, or ten years down the road to harm her, to destroy this perfect little joy—my last link to—” my voice broke, “—to you.”

Jamie clutched me, fiercely, and I clutched him back, letting his nearness warm me, dull the edge of that remembered pain. “I came out the stronger for it. I did, undeniably. BUT,” I laughed weakly, “I also learned that self-imposed isolation does absolutely no one any good, in the long run. Things got so much better, brighter once I learned to ask for help, once Penelope came.”
A tiny, pitiful wail sounded from the closet-nursery. Jamie and I both made at once to jump up, but I was fastest to my feet.

“There, now, winky, love,” I crooned as I lifted Ian from the bassinet. “Hungry again?” I held him securely against my shoulder as I turned back to the room, joying in the closeness of him there on my skin, even as he continued to cry.

Jamie was kneeling at the end of the bed now, facing us, eyes wide with concern for Ian....and yes, with the question that still remained.

“I’m not afraid this time,” I said simply, coming to stand before him, “because I’m not alone.”

“Never again to be.” Jamie rose high on his knees, his hands reaching to hold us close, his face and voice breaking with love as he whispered, “We are neither of us alone.”
“Oh, little love....You are a sweet one, aren’t you?”

It was just after sunrise and Ian and I were already up and at it, fed (for his part) and cuddling on the sofa. Truly, he was an uncommonly sweet baby, calm and untroubled by most things encountered in the course of his day, and fairly easy to quiet when he did cry or fuss. Bree, by contrast, had been cranky by default, at least for the first month. No less fiercely loved for it, of course, but I couldn’t deny my relief at the prospect of having an easier go of things in general with this little lad.

Beyond that though, even at only one week old, it was becoming clear that Ian had a very curious spirit. He was forever stretching his limbs and making little happy gasping sounds as he studied his surroundings, taking it all in with wide, keen eyes..... dark amber eyes, to Jamie’s utter delight. Currently, he was propped up against my bent knees, gumming his wrist enthusiastically.

“What have you got there, sweetheart?” I whispered, beaming down at him despite my sleepiness (and roaring headache and aching nipples). “Does it taste nice?”

Apparently it did, for he kept moving upward until, by complete accident, he caught his thumb in his mouth. He blinked once in surprised, then began sucking with alacrity. “Oh, aren’t you clever! Found a treat, have you?” I laughed. The only problem was, he hadn’t quite mastered the art of getting the other fingers out of the way, so his tiny fingernails were poking into his eyelid. I watched as his face went from sensory delight to puzzlement to realization of his discomfort then complete despair as he burst into a wail.

“It’s alright, winky,” I half-laughed, half-’aww’ed as I helped him get the extra fingers out of the way and he quieted again, blissfully self-soothing. “There, love, that’s better, isn’t it?”

“I swear, Sassenach,” came Jamie’s voice from the doorway to the kitchen through which he was walking with two steaming cups of tea. “I never seem to catch him at it, myself.”

“You’re awake! And an angel,” I all but moaned as he set my cup on the endtable to cool. “....Catch him at what?”

“Winking. Shout for me next time he does so I can see, aye?” He kissed my cheek, then his son’s. “Mind yourself, Ian. Ye must be trying it on wi’ your Mam a terrible lot for it to have become your name, aye?”

Jamie gave me what he surely thought was a roguish wink in demonstration (see: unsettlingly-intense blink) and I spluttered laughing. “Well, if he ever did take to winking, we’ll know he got it from me, won’t we?”

“I can wink!” Jamie declared indignantly, demonstrating again, the only difference being that he now
looked like a decidedly peevish owl.

“Trust me, darling, you really can’t, but don’t ever stop trying.” I kept giggling as I shifted Ian up off of my legs and cuddled him close. “But no, I call him winky for Rip van Winkle.”

“For what, now?” Jamie had just sat down, and he was looking over his cup as though he feared the fatigue had gone straight to my head.

“Because of how much he slept those first few days. Don’t you remember? I know you heard me call him that in hospital.”

Jamie silently mouthed the words rip van winkle then realization dawned. “Oh, aye,” he said slowly, nodding, “ye did, at that. Just went over my head, I suppose.”

“Oh, I see, you just presumed your wife was spouting nonsense in her addled state, mm?” Jamie’s sheepish grin was answer enough. “Well, anyway, I kept calling him that on my own, and over time it became winky, and it seemed to suit him, so, here we are.”

“But what in God’s name is a rip-Van-winkle? And what’s it to do wi’ sleeping?”

“Rip Van Winkle: eponymous hero of a classic American short story. Well—as classic as something published in the early 1800s can be.”

“Ah, ’tis a name. Van Winkle: a dutchman, then?”

“Almost! He’s a loyal subject of George III residing in New York who gets drunk and falls asleep on a mountaintop. Upon awakening, he learns that twenty years have passed, and he’s left to take stock of all that has changed in the interim.”

It took me a moment to register, but then there were chills rushing down my spine. Lord, if any two people in the world could relate to such a tale, they were in this room. Could there be some grain of truth behind the story, I wondered. Had Washington Irving himself experienced something that he couldn’t explain? Might one discern an ominous buzzing in the Catskill Mountains, had they the knowledge to recognize it? All of literature now suddenly seemed a secret testament, waiting to be sifted and seen for what it might truly be: evidence.

I shuddered again, brought back to the present only by Jamie’s hand gently prying at my fingers. “Give him here, mo ghraidh. You’ve sat wi’ him all the night.”

It was mostly a political commentary, if I recall correctly. The story was written a few decades after the American Revolution, and I think the author meant to give his own opinion of the new republic.” I sipped my tea, trying to remember the particulars of what old Rip had had to face. “The man got off easily, really,” I summarized flippantly. “Hardly anything at all compared to the adjustments you or I
had to make.”

“Snob,” Jamie teased.

“You say snob; I say we’ve bloody well earned our laurels! Lord, I mean, what’s two decades in the grand scheme of things?”

“Yet in a man’s own life,” Jamie shrugged, letting Ian chew on his knuckles, “tis a verra long time indeed.”

“That’s true... Particularly since the story suggests that he aged commensurately. Came down the mountain with the long beard and everything.”

“So he had to see his children already grown? All those years he missed?” Now it was Jamie’s turn to shudder. I saw him tighten his grip around Ian, a hand coming up over his head as though to shield him. “Perhaps you and I had the more difficult task in terms of weathering a baffling new society, Sassenach, but the dutchman had a burden to bear, himself...a mightily great burden.”

Thinking on such things must have been painful, for Jamie looked up suddenly with a determined sort of cheerfulness. “I’ll count myself blessed that the stones let me keep my youth. Doesna bear imagining what I’d look like, now, at, what... 228?”

It was clear Jamie wanted to keep things lighthearted, so we laughed and joked as the sunlight continued to fill the room, but I couldn’t resist asking, “Did you like the society you found, Jamie?”

He looked over at me across the baby’s head, Ian now—true to his nickname—sound asleep on Jamie’s shoulder.

“I only wondered how often you find yourself longing for your own time? If the past seems—better, purer, easier, you know?”

I myself had had such thoughts at times, particularly in those early days of readjusting to electrical contraptions and busy streets; or when reading the papers and seeing the pure scale of butchery and tragedy across the world. While the eighteenth century had surely been no picnic, there were days when I longed for it with startling fierceness.

Jamie leaned his head against Ian’s, thinking, though it didn’t take him long before he said: “I dinna think there shall ever be a generation that doesna glorify the setting of their own youthful memories. Still...Change will always be for the good and the bad, but a ‘society’ is what you make of it, aye? Provided I was free and the governance over me (on the whole) just and principled? Then the greater merit of a time should always be determined by the loved ones I had wi’ me, to make it mine.” He beckoned me close and I nestled in, laying my hand on Ian’s back. “Both will always be home, in their way. But this...” His hand pressed overtop mine, overtop Ian, “this is my time. Wherever you are, our family is: that is what I claim as mine.”

“Well, Jamie,” I said a long time later through the still-clearing lump in my throat, “you’ve got Mr. Winkle well and truly trounced on all counts, now.”

“Oh? How’s that?”

“The only blessing he truly counted to himself after the twenty year sleep was that his wife had died in the interim.”

Jamie’s eyes, first puzzled, went red with fearsome indignation. “Why, the wicked wee shite!”
“Yes, indeed,” I laughed, still wiping away a tender tear or two. “He grieved terribly when his dog didn’t recognize him, but was practically over the moon to learn he’d been made a widower. The story made quite a point of how hen-pecked the man was.”

“Well, as for that,” Jamie said, leaning forward to nuzzle his nose against mine, “I canna relate in the slightest.”
Little things far beneath us

Chapter Summary

From the tumblr prompts:

1. Was reading FMM again () and had forgotten how mean and judgy Claire’s old neighbors were to her back before Jamie came. I would LOVE to see a scene where sassyNACH gives her a peace of her mind!!!

2. Jamie going into his first skyscraper and looking out over the city.

Chapter Notes

Special Flashback installment!

Yes, the date is March! No, you’re not going crazy!

As noted on a previous post, I intentionally fastforwarded through the Ian pregnancy, with the intention to occasionally flash back and show some of the scenes I had already written, but chose to skip over

March, 1951

It was amazing to see the exact same expression on their faces as they looked out at the city below; to hear the awed delight in both voices, battle-hardened man and tiny girl in his arms somehow one in the novelty and wonder.

“Da?” Bree’s hands and nose were smushed right up against the glass. “Everyfin’s all LITTLE down-there.”

“Aye, you’re right, Bree.” His hands were occupied holding her up, but his own nose would have been eagerly flattened too, if it weren’t for the brim of his hat. “All the Cars and people are like wee bugs crawling about.”

“….They’re…. BUGS?”

“Nay,” he laughed, kissing her cheek before peering out again himself. “Only from up so high, they seem bitty and small, aye?”

“Uh-huh….Will they stay small all ever?”
“They’ll go right back to their proper sizes when we go back down,” I promised, slipping my arm around Jamie’s back.

“M’okay, that’s-good!”

“So, what do you think?” I asked Jamie, rubbing my belly gently and already knowing the answer.

“‘Tis a grand sight, Claire. Thanks for winning me over to the idea, for ‘tis well worth it.”

It was an unseasonably warm, blue day for March, and from the top of the skyscraper’s observation deck—even at only 25-or-so stories—the view was little short of spectacular.

“What’s the highest up you’ve been, previously?”

“When I voyaged on the Aeroplane, I suppose,” he said after considering a moment. “Though, I’ll confess, I didna once hazard looking out the wee portholes to inspect the view.”

“Oh, you absolutely must next time! It’s breathtaking to see the world from up there.”

“Aye, took my breath and my breakfast both, repeatedly.” He gave a playful shudder. “Why d’ye think I was so reluctant to let ye drag me up here? I’ve been atop mountains that were higher still than this, certainly, but a view so high of a city…. I shook his head, kissing the top of Bree’s before turning his gaze back to the horizon, “I cannae recall ever seeing such a thing.”

“We’ll have to pop down to New York, one of these days,” I said dreamily as I threaded my arm through his. “The Empire State building is over triple the height of this one.”

“Truly?” he breathed, staggered. “How far away is—”

“Oh my goodness! If it isn’t Mrs. Randall!”

We both jumped and whirled, and a dread I hadn’t felt in over a year suddenly drenched my entire body at sight of that perfect wave of blonde hair bobbing toward us.

“From the old house?” I was nearly as shocked by Jamie’s immediate comprehension as by the sight of Julianne Wirth herself, until I remembered. Lord, he must have encountered her as he went door to door, asking after me. I nodded once in answer and saw his jaw tighten. Knowing her—as I unfortunately did—she would have shut the door in his face immediately, unless she had called the police first.

To this very day, I couldn’t say what it was exactly that had made this woman take such a dislike to me. In those brief months, though, when Frank and I were—by all appearances, anyway—a normal, happily-expecting couple on Furey Street, Julianne had picked up on my detachment immediately and saw fit to make every encounter a living hell. She had a knack for bringing me down with a masterful array of half-veiled jibes, all while fawning and mooning over Frank, leaving me and her poor husband to stand awkwardly to the side. I was convinced it was all a game to her, not driven by any desire for Frank or anything at all, really, apart from fiendish cruelty.

After the divorce, when I was alone as a new mother, encounters with her had been rarer (for I didn’t bloody go out of my way to invite the Wirths over for dinner parties, anymore, did I?), but no less nasty, and had sent me into fits of enraged tears behind closed doors on more than one occasion. Even then, though, I had kept my mouth shut and taken it, too vulnerable and uncertain in my place in the world to risk outright confrontation.

“My word, what a pleasant surprise” the present incarnation of the spiteful bitch was simpering up
into my face, her 5-foot-2-inch frame still infuriatingly perfect. “How are you, Mrs. Randall?”

“Julianne,” I said with a warmth I that I’m sure did not extend to my eyes. “I’m quite well, thank you, and it’s Mrs. Fraser, now, in fact,” I said, turning to introduce Jamie. “This is my—”

“Oh, that’s right,” she was already saying, eyes alight as they moved between Jamie and me. “The divorce.” She said it with deepest pity and loud enough to be heard across half the observation deck.

I could hear Jamie’s rage in every tightly-controlled breath as he very deliberately put his free hand on the small of my back. Reinforcement, it said. Ye need only say the word.

“My, and look how much sweet little Barbara has grown.”

“Brianna,” I corrected with a smile so forced it could have broken through a brick wall. “I trust Daniel and the children are well?”

“Yes, wonderful, all,” she beamed over her shoulder, where her family stood at the opposite end of the observatory. Clearly, she didn’t want them personally witnessing this exchange, for she jumped right in with, “How is the job, going, these days, dear?”

Out for blood, but damn me, if I would let this harpy get the better of me. “It’s splendid, thank you for asking! It’s beyond compare, to be so useful in a context outside the home. Though, I’m working only part-time at present, as I’m soon to be studying to be a physician.”

“Goodness! What a devastating challenge that will be to your family; but you’ll keep at it no matter what, I’m sure,” she said with a sympathetic grimace before brightening and having the gall to pat my belly uninvited. “And you’re in the family way again, I see! How lucky that you found another husband so quickly.” She paused, distracted by Bree, who—oblivious to the drama—had pulled Jamie’s hat off to play with. For the first time, Julianne looked actually surprised, and I watched her expression go positively crazed with glee. “Ohhh…Oh, I do think I see.”

“See?” It was Jamie that said it, sharp and wary. I myself knew precisely what she was piecing together.

“Well, Mr. Randall was a lovely man, but there are limits to what even a saint can endure, of course, when he learns that his wife isn’t—well—Not all surprises are good ones, after all.”

I wasn’t certain if it was peripheral vision or premonition, but I caught Jamie’s wrist behind my back before he could even budge. His fingertips were like a vise through my coat, perhaps the only thing preventing him from lunging forward and slapping the woman. Lord knew, I agreed with the sentiment wholeheartedly, but I only gave him a squeeze.

And then, I charged.

“Oh!” I cried, blinking as though coming out of a daze. “Oh, Julianne, dear, I’m terribly sorry, have you finished?” She opened her mouth but I was already flashing her a dazzling fake smile to match every one of hers. “Didn’t think so. I’m sure you’ve got an endless list of faults to throw in the face of someone who, despite more than a year’s acquaintance, is an absolute stranger to you. That being true, of course, because no matter the many, many opportunities you had to extend kindness, you stood by and reveled in her struggles and made sure everyone called it shame.”

My voice was as saccharine-sweet as my smile, but I took a step forward, letting every inch of my superior height and pregnant bulk work to my advantage. “I truly hate to disappoint you, but I’ve no room in my life whatsoever for shame, and what’s more, I’m precisely where I wish to be.” I placed a hand softly on her arm, still beaming. “Please don’t ever come near me or my family again, mm?” I
leaned forward as though to kiss her cheek in farewell and took the opportunity to whisper in her ear, “Kindly go fuck yourself, Julianne.”

Her gasp and splutter were sweet, sweet music.

“Have a good day, dear,” I said at normal volume, stepping back and linking arms with Jamie. “Lovely to see you.”

Bree, uncharacteristically silent up to this point, piped up suddenly with, “Mummy, who’s ‘at?”

I maintained eye contact with the still-indignant Julianne and tilted my head to the side in challenge. Do you really want me to say aloud who (or what) you are?

She clamped her jaw shut and turned on her heel. Across the observatory, I watched her find her husband and children and begin herding them at once toward the stairs.

“Just a mean woman, lovey,” I said to Bree as I let the breath escape me in a whoosh. “No one we need worry about.”

“If we didn’t have an audience,” Jamie whispered, in French to evade little listening ears, “I would have you right there on that bench….RIGHT now.”

He was absolutely serious, of course. I laughed and patted his cheek. “We really need to work on finding a less base outlet for your appreciation of female assertion, my love.”

“Tell me another way, and I’ll do it, gladly. That was—Damn, Claire, if that wasna the best thing I’ve ever bloody seen!” He leaned in and kissed me, still chuckling gleefully as he pulled away. “Can we go find someone else for ye to eviscerate next?”

“Anyone in particular?”

“Well, and surely we can think of a handful of other people at least that have wronged ye over the years.” He jostled Bree encouragingly. “Is there anyone else that’s been mean to Mummy?”

“Umm….” She gave it considerable thought. “Somm-atimes you bite her on’the neck?”

Jamie’s grin was positively impish as he raised his eyebrows in my direction. “Never fear, Bree, Mummy likes that.”

Bree scrunched her eyebrows sternly. “Da, isnot NICE, bite’n.”

“It is the way I do it. Mummy’s verrrrra ticklish, aye?”
Chapter Summary

A new take on Voyager's breastfeeding interlude

Early August, 1951

“Oh, sweetheart… please be reasonable for Mummy…..” Claire’s whisper, he registered, as it pulled him up out of sleep, cracking with quiet desperation.

He pushed himself up off the pillows—2:51, the clock revealed—and she immediately gave a little whimper of regret at seeing his movement. “I promise, I wasn’t trying to wake you.”

“Dinna fash, my Sassenach.” He got to his feet and crept over to the rocking chair. She looked like some magnificent pagan goddess, all gilded by the glow of the streetlight with her nightgown puddled around her waist and a babe at her breast. Aye, he thought, as he settled into a comfortable crouch beside them, and if I encountered her in some primeval forest, I would worship her without question, would I not?

Uttering a silent contrition for casual blasphemy, he kissed Claire’s bare shoulder, his hand automatically coming up to cup the wee, brown head. “What’s he done to upset ye, then?”

“It’s what he’s not doing.” She gave the wean a nudging shake, then closed her eyes with a sigh that was bordering on a sob. It was a credit to her, though, how gentle her hands upon him remained, her thumb softly stroking him even as her fatigue and frustration were clearly mounting. “He wakes up crying about how hungry he is, and then doesn’t even have the decency to finish the whole meal.”

“Och, Ian,” he chided softly, unable to keep from smiling, “that’s bad form, son.” For the babe was indeed fast asleep, the nipple still in his slack mouth.

“He only got halfway through one side and didn’t even touch the second, and—” She winced. “Jesus H. Christ, I’m so goddamn full it aches like the —Jamie— no, no, Jamie, what are you doing?”

For he had stood and begun to extricate the bairn with gentle hands.

“Darling,” she protested, almost despairingly as he carefully lifted the sleeping lad into his arms. “I have to get him to nurse, else I’ll never sleep.”

“He’ll no’ be waking anytime soon, lass,” he said firmly, moving toward the large closet where Ian had his crib. “He’s had his fill and must sleep it off, aye?”

As he settled Ian carefully down, so as not to wake him, he heard her exhaling in a great rush, but the sound was muffled, as though she had put her face in both hands. She often did so when trying to calm herself from some great emotional turmoil or stress. Lord, and she had every reason to be prey to both. Caring for a newborn, he’d learned—even without the enormous responsibility of being their only source of nourishment—was one of the more punishing varieties of joy.
She had both her arms wrapped about herself, he saw, as he returned to the room and closed the door behind him, and she had her breasts cupped and lifted to ease their weight. “Will you fetch me the pump?” she was saying, still agitated. Her voice was tight with wavering control, eyes glassy. “I can’t even bloody bear to—Oh!…Oh….

Jamie….”

For he had knelt between her knees, right on the floor before her. Slowly, he laid his hand atop hers, where it cradled one breast. “May I?”

“Love….” Every trace of the burdens of the night vanished from her eyes. They were misty and soft as she slipped her hand free and reached out to touch his face. “Always.”

A whisper of a memory pulsed through him. Her, too.

*High ceilings and rich, dark wood. Scents of cassoulet—sweet woodsmoke— that infernal beeswax mingled with sweet, green things. Fine silks. The bleariness of late nights and dawns too soon broken. Worry and planning and fear…. but also, unspeakable joy. Healing. Mornings flooded with love and sunlight. Tiny flutterings. Claire.*

“Always, Jamie,” she whispered again as she guided him to her breast.

He groaned at the instant rush of her milk in response to his touch; hot and sweet, rich and thick, strange as some exotic fruit, and yet somehow as familiar to him as his own scent. Her skin was so unutterably soft under his fingertips, against his tongue. He moaned again and wrapped both his arms fully around her, holding her at hip and shoulder as he surrendered to the bliss of her, of following the call of some instinct long-dormant within him. She had her fingers twined in his hair, cupping him closer against her, making soft noises of relief and love, even as she begged him. *Harder.* He obeyed, an acolyte, moving, slowing, pausing, hurrying, responding, worshipping her in this act of intimate service.

And blasphemy though it might be, this was a holy thing, Jamie knew, holy and utterly powerful. The sheer ascendancy of her body: to be able to give life and sustain it thereafter; and for he himself to be fed at that source—

His body responded mightily to her power, yes, but he forced himself to stay quiet and still, even when she pulled herself gently free and took his face in her hands, the task complete. A kiss, long and warm and sweet with milk, and then his cheek was pressed between her breasts, her hands holding him in tender peace. He would happily remain there, always; eyes closed, knowing nothing more than a lifetime of singing the prayer of her in his heart, held surely and safe against her own.

*Aye. Without question.*
"Will ye let me do this later?" he murmured, with a soft bite. "When the child's come, and your breasts fill wi' milk? Will ye feed me, too, then, next to your heart?"

I clasped his head and cradled it, fingers deep in the baby-soft hair that grew thick at the base of his skull.

"Always," I whispered.
“Hey....um.... hey, Mummy?” came the voice from the bedroom.

“Yes, pumpkin?”

“....Um....I forgot...”

Jamie grinned, straightening from tying his work boots at the kitchen table. As much as part of him fairly rejoiced at the prospect of getting out of the house into the fresh air again (not to mention a reprieve from the constant vigilance of newborn care), thought of leaving the three of them felt, in that moment, like loss: as though he might miss some moment in Ian’s life that would never be seen again.

*Take comfort, man,* he counseled himself, *there are only so many different ways that a wean can shit and sleep and make sweet wee gruntings, aye?*

Still, his heart ached with an anxious kind of warmth as he walked softly through the house to stand in the doorway of the bedroom, watching his still-pajama-ed family prepare for their day.

“Mummy?” Bree was saying again as Claire lowered Ian down onto the bed to be changed.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

To his surprise, Bree immediately sighed, sounding defeated. “I really love him.”

“Oh, lovey, I’m so glad you do,” Claire said, bending down to kiss her.

The lass started to clamber up onto the bed. “But, I really do.”

“Aww, well, Ian loves you, too, even if he can’t say so, yet.”

Bree took up a protective spot at the wean’s side, gingerly stroking his head while Claire busied herself with gathering the diapering supplies. “How come Beeyin’s hair doesna look like me?”

“So we can tell the two of you loons apart,” Jamie said, coming to join them.

Bree scrambled to her knees and was halfway through a squeal of greeting before she stopped, surveyed his attire, and cast him a look that would have done her Auntie Jenny proud.

“Where’you goin’, Da?”

“I have to go to work today, lass,” he said, settling on the edge of the bed on Ian’s other side.
Bree scoffed. “No you dinna. You got’s to stay!”

“I must go, cub,” he said, a bit sadly. “Mr. Tom has been verra gracious wi’ time away, but I need to go check on all the horses, aye?”

“Are they sick?” Bree pressed, as Claire bent over Ian and began unfastening the pins.

“Nay, I’m sure they’re just fine, but it’s been a few weeks since I saw them, and I mustn’t neglect my duties, ye see? Dinna fash, though,” he added, quickly forestalling the inevitable grumbles, “I’ll not even be gone the whole day. I’ll just be there a few hours, and then I shall be bac— MIND THE—”

He acted on pure instinct. By the time he truly took stock of things, the scene was a perfect tableau. The babe was still laying serenely on his back, exposed to all the world and best pleased for it. Bree, next to him, was giggling uncontrollably, her wee face red and redder every moment from not being able to draw breath. Claire’s face, though—that was the pearl beyond price: dumbfounded with shock and dazzlingly lovely....even with piss dripping liberally off cheek and jaw. Jamie had shot out his hand quickly enough to block most of the stream, but....

“He didna get ye IN the mouth, did he?” he asked, struggling mightily to look only sympathetic.

She shook her head, open-mouthed, unable to move or speak, just blinking wide-eyed an emitting a most un-Claire-like whimper.

“Do ye ken, Sassenach...” he said, his voice shaking with mirth even as piss dripped off of his hand, “...I dinna think I’ve ever once in my entire life seen ye completely speechless.”

She tried to remedy that point, but then only shuddered and hiccuped with a spluttering laugh as she wiped a sleeve over her face, groaning.

“Ian, a bhalach,” Jamie crooned approvingly, rubbing the boy’s fat, piss-soaked belly with a spare cloth, “that’s quite an aim ye’ve got! You’ll make a fine marksman one day.”

“Mummy!” Bree demanded of a sudden, shouting urgently over Claire’s muttering about direct bloody hit alright, “what is that?”

Claire wiped the last of the damp from her face with an enormous sigh, though her eyes were sparkling with merriment. “That would be urine, darling. Pee.”

“NO, what is THAT.”

They followed the direction in which she was pointing, then shared The Look: that moment of unspoken hilarity, love, and what-the-hell-next that surely was common to all happy parents. Jamie’s belly was shaking as he inclined his head toward his wife, completing things with the second act: you’d best handle this one.

To her credit, though, Claire rallied herself quickly, and said quite simply, “That’s a penis, sweetheart. It’s what boys piss from.”

“All boys do?”

Claire shrugged as she bent over the baby once more, her hands now tentative, waiting for a second barrage to unleash. “All the ones I know.”

Bree’s eyebrows were scrunched up as she considered this new information. Then, as slow and ominous as an owl sighting prey, her head swiveled in his direction. “Da... are you a boy?”
“A supremely logical mind, your daughter has, Jamie,” Claire said in wry amusement. “If Ian’s a marksman, Bree has a future in the law!”

Jamie could do nothing but reply, rather tightly, “Aye, Bree, I am.”

She nodded, once. “Do you have a...uh....” She searched for the word. “Pee-nits?”

“Yes, a leannan,” he conceded after a subterranean groan that had Claire biting her lips together to keep quiet. “I do, indeed.”

Bree eyed him with interest, but no great consternation as she asked, “....Do ye laugh at it?”

“Do I—What? Oh, hush yourself, Sassenach, it’s no’ that funny.”

“Bloody well IS, according to Bree!” she howled, leaning against the bed with one hand and covering her eyes with the other.

Brianna, delighted by her mother’s apparent support for her budding train of thought, grinned wildly. “If I had one of them, those, um, pee-nitses, I would laugh at it every day!!”

“Bree—Br—Bree, lovey,” Claire hooted, trying to catch her breath, “whatever makes you say that??”

“Mummy,” Bree drawled, as though this were the most obvious thing in the world, gesturing toward Ian. “LOOK at it!”

Claire did.

And then suddenly, Jamie’s wife and daughter had vanished, their places taken up by two fiendish witches, cackling uproariously in one another’s arms and reigning in feminine superiority over their domain for all to behold.

Jamie finished diapering the lad himself with a show (a very bad show, mind) of indignation. “Dinna listen to the foul besoms, Ian. Funny in appearance, mayhap, but infinitely agreeable, and may the right lassie give ye cause to ken it, someday.”
August, 1951

Over a year of fatherhood had gifted Jamie with many new skills, those wee tricks of the trade proudly gleaned from the never-ending, ever-shifting experience that was Brianna.

Soothing a child that didn’t yet understand human speech, though, he reflected above the shrieking issuing from his cradled arms, was apparently not one of them. “Hush, laddie….” he begged softly nonetheless as he swayed and rocked. “It’s alright, Ian….hushh…”

Claire hadn’t awoken when Ian had cried, this time, and oddly enough, he was thankful for it. Thrice already she’d been up to tend him, beating Jamie upright in a twinkling with the ‘I’m already up. Don’t worry, go back to sleep’ already on her lips. She was a fiercely-attentive mother, and never would he fault her for it, but the lass needed her sleep, all the more after nearly three weeks of this punishing newborn routine. Besides, he felt it was his duty to do his part and more, this time around, given his absence during Brianna’s infancy. God, to have held wee Bree, then, so small like this…

Thankfully, this most recent of Ian’s cries came only an hour after the last feeding, and so Claire would have her sleep. He’d brought the wean out into the sitting room to be changed, but a cursory sniff had revealed that there was, in fact, no need. Still, even minutes later, the boy was howling at the top of his lungs in Jamie’s arms, red-faced and windmilling his arms around like mad within his blanket.

Wame twisting, Jamie had been running through the list of fears—horrific scenarios from the damned pamphlets running through his mind like sirens—but truly, nothing seemed immediately amiss with the lad, in terms of sickness or things that would be causing pain. Ought he to wake Claire? Raising Ian up to eye level, Jamie pressed lips against the babe’s forehead. Not feverish, he thought, but warm; warmer than usual, certainly.

“Is it too hot in your wee pajamas, mo chridhe?” he crooned as he began unsnapping the buttons down the front. “Is that what ye’ve been trying to tell me?” He slipped his hand under the loosening folds of fabric and found that the skin of Ian’s belly was clammy. “Dinna fash, wee love. Da will have it all sorted in just a moment, aye?”

The rush of cool air seemed to soothe the lad, for though he continued to cry as Jamie finished undressing him, his jerking and flailing of limbs began to slow. By the time Jamie dropped both cotton suit and blanket onto the rug, Ian’s cries had quieted to little more than a soft gruntling of displeasure, the flush beginning to recede.

“Aye, that’s much better, a bhailaich.” Jamie kissed the tender forehead. “Poor wee thing,” he murmured, swaying back and forth. “It must be verra frustrating, I’d wager, when your parents are so daft to comprehend your requests.”

Ian scrunched up his face as though in rueful agreement (or perhaps as though biting a lemon) then sighed, stretching his now-bare legs luxuriously.

Settling with his own legs stretched out along the sofa, Jamie managed to prop himself up against the pillows one-handed and drape a blanket over his lower half. The bairn, he lowered belly-down against his chest, the wee brown head resting just below his chin.
Ian, unsettled by all the shifting and stirring, was grunting fiercely, struggling and snuffling until, to Jamie’s shock, the wee lad suddenly lifted his head all the way up and looked him straight in the eye.

Jamie stared back, dumbstruck. He experienced the startling sensation of sighting a deer in the forest, that rare flash of a moment before the beast takes flight, golden eyes staring back in the haze….a moment of exquisite stillness and beauty.

He inclined his head, his heart squeezing. “Hello to you, too…. my wee one…”

Ian blinked, then the spell vanished, and the boy flopped his head back down, exhausted by the effort of accomplishment.

“Sweet laddie,” Jamie said, one finger tracing the whorls atop the fur-soft head.

On sudden impulse, a visceral need to recapture that closeness, Jamie wriggled both arms out of the sleeves of his nightshirt, and carefully pulled it over his head, laying Ian back down onto his now-bared chest so that they were skin-to skin. He shuddered in relief, feeling the overwhelming peace and intimacy of it settling over them at once, Ian’s small, solid weight touching something within Jamie’s soul.

Already, he realized, he knew the one held within this sweet little boy. True, Ian couldn’t speak, nor smile, nor truly show signs of any understanding whatsoever, but there were still moments—moments like these, he thought, both arms cradling and keeping his tiny son—in which Jamie could simply feel, truly know the precious spirit that lay within; waiting only to find its own voice with time and age. It was a wordless knowing, this bond, but strong and as clear to Jamie as any other love he had ever held in his heart.

“I love everything that you are, Ian,” he whispered in his own tongue. “All your life, I will. I promise.”

Ian lifted his head up again—clever lad—and came back down facing the other direction, the bitty whiffing of his breaths tickling Jamie’s neck. In the resultant stillness, Jamie could feel Ian’s heartbeat, quick and true against the heavier thud of his own. The two rhythms joined together in a warm, soothing thrum that had them both drifting away into the same warm, darkness, held safely together.

He thought he felt Claire, sometime, smoothing his hair off his forehead, murmuring something soft and sweet; kissing him, kissing Ian, her hands blessing them both. Perhaps it was a dream….but he hoped not.
August, 1951

It was a blissful serendipity, and so rare, so unheard of as to be little short of breathtaking:

....having awakened well before dawn to find myself not only feeling oddly refreshed and rested, but with both children still sound asleep, the entire house to myself, and energy to be at my own personal leisure.

Not that I would have minded if Jamie had been about; quite the contrary, for unoccupied hours together were more rare these days, what with the constant demands of the children and the need for Jamie to keep a regular schedule at the barn. We still utilized Penelope, of course, but mostly to keep Bree occupied during the day, give us all a fighting chance at being well-fed, and allow me to get a bit of sleep. By the time Jamie got home most days, Penelope had gone, meaning that we were both on-duty in those evening hours.

Yes, I would have loved to share the morning stillness with Jamie, and it was still possible, as he could return from his Saturday morning walk at any moment. Still, I was luxuriating in the solitude, soaking it up into my tired limbs like water into parched roots. I kept on pricking up my ears, waiting in dread for a tell-tale wail or, worse yet, a ‘Mummmyyyyyy?’ from the other end of the house. None came, which meant that every single minute as I made tea and toast, as I took a hot bath while reading a few chapters of Simone de Beauvoir, was an unexpected gift, filling me up like a helium balloon with contentment and, dare I say it...glee!

As I finished toweling off and slipped into my robe, I was still more ecstatic to learn from the chiming of the hall clock that it was only 6:00. Feeling like I could conquer anything motherhood had to throw at me that day, I was positively striding as I made my way to the kitchen to make another cup of tea, such that I nearly ran headlong into Jamie, who had apparently just come in by the back door. My gasp was a horrific sound, arrowing around the narrow walls.

It wasn’t the simple reflex of being startled, seeing him suddenly when I’d thought myself all alone. No, in my unusually-present state of mind, my eyes had immediately taken in his actual appearance. “What the bloody hell happened to you?” came the urgent whisper painfully from my throat as I stared at him, wide-eyed in alarm.

His skin was beet-red from head to toe, with sweat having soaked through his clothing and saturated his hair. There were runnels flowing freely down his face and neck, and his breathing was so labored that I leapt forward at once to check his heart. He waved me off, and I gasped even louder at seeing his hands. The skin of all his knuckles was raw and bleeding, flayed off in terrible, dirty grazes. “Dear God!! Jamie, were you attacked??” I demanded, my voice raising several octaves in panic. “Did—?”

“No,” he got out, though his chest was still heaving as he gulped air, swaying a bit. “I’m—fine, lass —” I started to protest that he bloody the hell was NOT fine, but he cut me off. “I was only running the trails. Naught to fret over.” He bent to kiss me, then thought better of it, given the sweat, shrugged, and moved past me into the kitchen.

“‘Running?’“ I said incredulously, following him. “What, from a BEAR? Jamie, you look—”

“I ken how I look, Sassenach,” he said, rather tersely, grabbing a glass from the cupboard and filling it at the sink. “I went a wee bit overboard wi’ the speed, but I’m fine.”
“I know you didn’t bloody up your hands running, Jamie,” I said, starting to get angry. “Even if you’d tripped and fallen, you’d have skinned the palms, not the knuckles.” He muttered something under his breath in Gaelic as he finished gulping. “Well? Were you fighting someone? Did you get in a fight??”

“No,” he said at once, still trying to catch his breath. It wasn’t just the exertion, though. His teeth were slightly gritted and—yes, damn him!—he was avoiding my eye. “Please, just believe me, Claire there’s nothing to—”

“Just believe? When you come home bloodied, James Fraser, clearly being evasive about it,” I said, trying not to raise my voice, “I have absolutely every right to ask and worry. And you not telling me what the devil is going on is—it’s just—”

He held up a hand, and I surprised even myself by falling silent at once. “I’ll tell ye, if ye insist, Sassenach,” he said, sounding defeated. “But will ye give me another several moments to calm my breath?”

I opened my mouth, then nodded, crossing my arms. He drank another glass of water and closed his eyes, breathing deeply, leaning over the sink.

“Will you at least let me bandage your hands?” I said stiffly.

He looked over his shoulder at me in surprise, and after only a moment’s hesitation, smiled faintly and nodded.

I retrieved the First-Aid box in silence and set it on the counter next to the sink. Just as wordlessly, he shook off his hands after rinsing them in cool water and presented them to me. Most of the dirt that had been in the raw flesh had been washed off, but I still pulled out the antiseptic and carefully cleansed the area. He winced, and had to grit his teeth against the stinging onslaught, but he didn’t pull away or cry out.

As I was just beginning the tricky task of fastening the bandages, he very quietly said, “I punched a tree.”

In the immediate split-second following, I very nearly burst out laughing AND unleashed a withering barrage of ‘you WHAT??’ and its subsequent questions and demands. The result of this internal war was stalemate, my face remaining blank as paper as I simply said, “Why?”

Jamie didn’t respond at once, and I was obliged to look up into his face. He, though, was staring down at his feet, clearly not wanting to look at me.

I resumed the bandaging, torn between loving patience and snapping at him to get the bloody hell on with it. I gave him a bit more time before firmly asking again, “Why, Jamie?”

A beat. Then—

“After Culloden....”

Two less likely words to emerge from his mouth in that moment, I couldn’t have fathomed.

We had scarcely spoken of the battle, nor of the two years that followed before he came through the stones. He’d tried, from time to time, in response to careful questions on my part, but one or the other of us would change the subject in the end, the horrors of those memories doing more harm than good in the revisiting. I’d hardly any notion of what those years had been like other than the broad brushstrokes of pain, fear, loneliness, and heartbreak. To hear him freely volunteer the
“I felt the fight within me die, that very day.” He spoke in a near-monotone, the bones and muscles of his face set in a rigidity that terrified me nearly as much as the words themselves. “It wasna only the battle, little of it as I recall; but also the devastation of the battlefield as I lay in fever....hearing the Redcoats shooting the prisoners, my friends.” He spoke slowly, as though forcing himself to give every single experience the respect of full, heartbreaking acknowledgement. “Seeing the bodies heaped high to be burned....the fever burning within my flesh as I longed to be killed alongside them.... Then being brought to Lallybroch; the slow healing as I learned to walk again.... the cave.”

I said nothing as I kept at my work of bandaging him, to give him the privacy to speak, but I very softly ran my thumb across the back of his hand. A gentle pressure warmed me in return. His voice didn’t change, though.

“Between the horrors of war and knowing I’d lost you forever, mo chridhe, any fight within me was gone, immediately.” His voice was steady, but hoarse and low, hardly to be heard. “Every new day was merely another bootprint, stamping it further and further into the ground. Loneliness, still more; hunger, still more; longing and regret, still more, still deeper.”

The morning stillness, so soothing and peaceful a quarter hour ago, now seemed to hiss with ghostly shrieks.

“‘Fight’?” I asked carefully as I gave him back his hands, wanting to make sure I understood; and feeling it the only thing right to ask, in that moment.

“The spirit, the— power that turns man into warrior. Rage, I suppose; whatever fire within him that propels him into dangers he ought naturally to fear. I had it once, ken?”

I nodded. I had known him as Red Jamie for longer than I’d known him as Jamie of the twentieth century. I knew how that ‘fight’ within him, as he put it, had enlivened and driven him, for better or worse, along his path of life, from cattle raids to prison breaks to battle charges. I knew the certainty and the safety of that power, as well as the almighty terror it could unleash.

“That power was incarnate within me for so long, being so one with my life as a man that when I felt it snuff out that day, along with the losses I’d suffered already..... I didna ken who I was, Claire, or if I was anything at all. Most days in that cave, when I had nothing save time to think, I was convinced I wasna.”

A flicker of memory stirred, a flash of that that first morning after he’d found me, that same haunted voice.

I havena been a man since you left...before Culloden

“After I found you and Brianna,” he was saying, the slightest spark lightening his voice now, “Every day since then, I’ve been—Christ, so happy, unbearably so; so blessed by joy and plenty that I scarcely gave it a thought, that warrior spirit that used to reside in my body, the man that was capable of such violence. Nor did I miss it,” he said with sudden urgency, meeting my eyes for the first time, his own burning intensely with the need to be believed. “Unlike in the cave, when such fire might have sustained me, the absence of it here, in this life—It was a relief, Claire. I no longer needed it to ken who I was or whether or not I was being a good man, ye see?”

I did see. But I also hadn’t overlooked his use of the past tense. “And now?”

He let out a breath, relieved. “These past few months, even before Ian arrived, I found myself more
and more feeling the sparks of that fire again, blazing through my body. I couldn’t ignore it for long. For a time, I was able to dispatch it by hard work outdoors at the barn—or else by coming to your bed,” he said, a bit sheepishly. “But it’s a bit like your Immunities, I suppose. What might once have cured an illness immediately due to the novelty of the remedy might be insufficient to the same task years later, because the body has adapted to it, making the potency less keenly felt. Did I get that right?” he asked suddenly with a brief tug of a smile.

“Close enough,” I said, returning it, though my belly still seemed full of writhing worms. “So you…punched a tree as a new kind of remedy? Because it’s getting worse?” I personally had suggested that method to him years ago, on the road with the rent party. The thought of him in enough distress and frustration now to necessitate it again was both alarming and, if I were being honest, a bit hurtful.

He nodded, shame clouding his expression again. “Whenever I can, I’ll go running. I’ve seen folk do so for recreation, and thought it might help; which it has. Rather than walking in peaceful contemplation, as I used, I’ll run, as fast as I’m able, getting as exhausted as I possibly can, and it—It helps, usually. Gets it out of my system, as it were. Only today, I’d been running and running, and I could still feel the grip of it upon me, such that once would have stoked me to kill a man with my bare hands, and I—”

He cut off quite abruptly and turned aside, closing his eyes as he leaned his back against the counter, torn between dismay and fury at himself, by the way his mouth and jaw were working. I thought about putting my arms around him, of holding and soothing him, but I knew him well enough to know that it wasn’t yet the time. I leaned against the counter next to him without compelling him to look at me.

“It was a relief to be free of it,” he said again, tightly, “to have moved, or so I thought, beyond it. Now that it’s back… I dinna ken what I’m to do about it.”

“Was today the first time that it—” I groped for an appropriate word. “—overflowed like that?”

“No. Several times a week, I’ll feel my heart quicken and my breath come fast through my nostrils and I feel as though I must do—SOMETHING—or die.” He winced as he unconsciously clenched his battered fists. “Usually I’ll just leave and stand on my own for a time until I feel myself calming, or else I’ll be short wi’ someone in my irritability. I’ve not yet resorted to physical violence, but sometimes I—”

“I’ve never seen that from you at home,” I said softly, meaning to reassure him. “Never.”

“Aye, but I work verra hard to make it so,” he said, a tinge of mournfulness now showing in his voice. “You and the bairns are my life and my joy, and would swear on my mother’s grave that I should deplete all my strength before letting myself be aught but gentle wi’ the three of ye, and yet still there are times when it comes verra close, and I—”

Before I could interject, he swore and threw his hands up in despair. “I mean, have men changed so greatly in these two hundred years that they no longer have such feelings to control? Am I just an animal, then, that I canna—”

“They do,” I said at once. “The world has changed, of course, and it’s no longer a fact of life that men must be physically ready to fight, but certainly, many feel some of that latent drive within them; a greater number than you’d know by looking at them, I think.”

“And what do they do about it?” he asked, looking over at me eagerly, genuinely needing the answer.
“Well....” I sighed, feeling the bleakness of the world suddenly crowding around me. “The worst will make headlines. They’ll murder or violate, or pursue lives of crime; perhaps they’ll become soldiers to do such things under the government’s banner. The more common sort might find simply themselves always angry, with all that energy pent inside them. A good many will drown the feelings in drink, or take that need for physical violence out upon those closest to them—their wives and children, usually.”

I had been talking more or less without thought, letting the speculations roll from my tongue unchecked, fascinated by them even as I formed the words. Coming back to a sharper awareness, though, I looked up at Jamie, who had gone pale. “I swear to ye, Claire,” he said, face hard with resolve and hurt and fear, “I wouldna ever—EVER—”

“I know,” I said at once, almost laughing with the absurdity of it as I came around to stand in front of him and take his face in my hands. “I know that. You made me a promise, remember?”

Attempting to lighten the mood with oddly-fond memories of the one time he had beaten me apparently was not the correct move. He looked still more devastated at the reminder, so before he could speak, I cut him off. “You said it yourself: you are a warrior, and—”

“Were,’ he corrected.

“Are,” I insisted right back. “It’s in your bones and your brain, still, just as surely as your knowledge of languages or chess. It’s part of you; but you’ve never been cruel, Jamie, and I have absolute trust that you’d never allow it to consume you like those types I was blethering on about.”

“Still...” he said with a shame-faced shrug, “I might lash out when I oughtn’t, or say something to the bairns in such a state that—”

“Well that’s just bloody being a parent, isn’t it?” I said with feeling, and he was so shocked that he laughed. “No matter how carefully we try, there will be days when both of us will snap and shout and lash out with our words or need to leave the room to compose ourselves. That’s being a human, not being a man,” I said, my voice dropping suddenly back to tenderness. “I’m not saying I feel the same things as you, but you’re not completely alone in it, either.”

He took my hand and kissed it before laying it back against his cheek, keeping his own atop it.

“I think you should join Charlie’s hurling league.”

“What??” That startled him enough that both our hands dropped.

“I didn’t think of it before, but that’s the positive side of what men nowadays do to cope with their fighting impulses,” I said excitedly. “They’ve got more leisure time than you or your brother-in-law or your father or any of your ancestors had, and so they play athletic games, to run and knock one another about. Gives them a chance to get their rage and energy out, in a way that people enjoy and encourage! So, I think it would be a good idea for you to do likewise!”

“Aye, it’s a thought,” he said, seeming actually to consider before shaking his head with decision. “But no. I appreciate the suggestion, but I’ll be fine.”

“If your idea of ‘fine’ is coming home every weekend with bloodied knuckles, it absolutely is nothing of the sort,” I said dangerously. “Why not join? You adore Charlie and his mates, don’t you? It would give you a lovely chance to—”

“I’ll not give up our spare time together, Sassenach,” he said sincerely, “at the evenings or the Week Ends only to play games with the lads. T’would be— selfish and damnably frivolous. It isna fair to
ye, nor the bairns, and—"

I stopped him with a finger over his lips. “It isn’t frivolous. It isn’t unfair to me. It’s an hour or two a week at most, and if it helps you with this, then it’s well worth it for all of us.” He was unconvinced, but I soldiered on. “Besides, when the weather is nice, and when Ian gets a bit older, the children and I can come watch you play! It’ll be good to get out and socialize more.” Slumped as he was against the counter, I was able to thunk my forehead gently against his and give him a playful, wheedling smile. “I want you to try it, love. Please?”

He stayed stonefaced for a few moments, then a slow grin began to spread. “Alright then.”

“Excellent,” I said, kissing him on the mouth. “Something tells me it will be MUCH more fun to punch Irishmen than trees. At least they’ll give you a run for your money!”
Chapter Summary

A baby-free night out for the Frasers.

Debauchery ensues

Chapter Notes

Bostonian friends, plz forgive me for taking liberties. I do know that factually, Symphony Hall doesn’t have boxes, damn them *per se,* but.... well...

September, 1951

“GOD, it’s good to be drunk again.”

I’d said that FAR too loudly, given that we were in a great bloody swell of finely-dressed folk queuing to enter the auditorium, but *funnily enough,* I was too drunk to be bothered about it.

It was our first real night out alone since Ian was born, and we were enjoying it for all it was worth. We’d shared a sumptuous meal and a *large* bottle of wine and ordered a whisky or two apiece while waiting for the house doors to open for the Dvořák suite that was being performed. Standing now in line waiting to get our handbills, I was positively *plastered* and couldn’t have been happier about it, to be honest.

“D’you like it?” I demanded of my tuxedoed husband, somehow feeling it necessary that he be on my same plane of looniness. “Th’drunk?”

“Oh, aye,” he grinned. “Tis *always* great fun to see ye in drink, Sassenach.”

“Wot??” I rounded on him, indignant. “You’re *not* drunk?”

“I’m a Scot, remember? I’m never *drunk*.”

This utter lie was reinforced at once as he ran into an umbrella stand. We both fizzed with giggles as he struggled not to fall, drawing the eyes of many a more decorous symphony-goer ahead of us in line. I made faces at them when they’d turned their backs (well, *almost*-turned, as it turned out) causing Jamie to *hastily* usher me—though shaking with laughter himself—into another queue and up toward our seats.

“These can’t be *ours??*” I said, flabbergasted, for he’d brought me to a private mezzanine box angled toward the stage, decked out with comfortable armchairs.

“Course they can! Only the best for my lady,” he said, kissing my cheek exuberantly. “That and Tom’s brother has tickets for the whole season and happened to offer these up.”
“But it’s so—so—” I wobbled around the box in my high-heeled shoes, trailing my fingers across the luxurious curtains. “shwanky...no.....swhank.... bloodyhell. POSH.”

“Well, and so are you, a nighean,” he said, gesturing to my getup. “Like a million bucks.” This last was delivered with such a spot-on American accent, I burst out laughing, making him say it again and again.

I did look fairly smashing, I admitted, especially for being only five-or-so weeks post-delivery. I hadn’t worn anything so elegant since our wedding, but when Jamie had announced grandly a few days before that we were going ‘to the symphony,’ I’d been shocked enough that I’d taken myself to the shops and risen to the occasion. It was a tea-length gown, black lace over a cream lining, belted at the waist and baring my shoulders daringly, accentuated still more by elbow-length black gloves. I humbly estimated a cool million-and-a-half for good measure.

Jamie pulled me down into the seat beside his. “Come on, lass,” he said, slurring only a bit. “S’tarting.”

So it was. The lights were dimming and the people below scurrying to their seats.

I plopped down and twined my fingers with Jamie’s, leaning my head on his shoulder and letting things be a delicious, swimmy blur for an indeterminate period of time as the opening movement progressed.

“Remind me ‘gain why it is YOU wanted to come to see music?” I asked in his ear over the sleepy oboe interlude, having to concentrate hard on each syllable.

“Mm?” He jerked, popping his eyes open. “Wha’s that?”

“You are drunk, too!” I crowed in whispered delight, poking him in the chest.

“Only a BIT,” he muttered with dignity, straightening. “And we’re here because a night out was just the thing, and I thought ye might like it. And if it sounds like little more than a verra large beehive to my own ear, so be it.”

“I do like it,” I whispered back, beaming, the whisky making me very emotional about it, in fact. “New World Symphony is one of my favorites. I get chills whenever the brass start up with the—oh—um—oh, you know, the bit where they go duhhh-dut-dut-DUHHH-dt-dahhh! DUHHH-duhhh-da-dt-DUHHH!! Y’know?”

He snorted and fondly shushed me. “No, I dinna ken, but I’ll keep my ears tuned for the dut-duhs, all the same.”

The piece was dreamy and epic, utterly sweet, then shifting to great terrifying roars and back again, just like I remembered. About twenty more minutes in, though, my alcohol haze lifted just enough for my mind to begin to wander pleasantly.

Along with my hands.

Jamie’s groan was loud enough that I had to fling the hand upward to cover his mouth. “ShhhhhhhhhHHHHHHHH!” I hissed. “You’ll disturb—THE MUSIC.”

“Suzznuck,” came the protest from my gloved hand before I consented to remove it. “What in God’s name do ye—oh—C H R I S T!”

I hadn’t removed said hand without purpose, now, had I?
He was hard in my hand—very, though he was doing quite a masterful job of acting casual from the navel upward, training his eyes intently on the stage, but his breathing was another matter entirely. “Oh... God...” he gasped, legs trembling as I rubbed and teased and pulled through his trousers. “Sassenach,” he whispered urgently, “ye must st—Jesus—stop that...else—” He hissed as he felt me move away. “Where in the name of—?”

I’d stood up, quite suddenly, and moved to the side of the box furthest from the stage, sheltered from any onlookers by the obliging angle of the curtains. I put my back against the wall .... and beckoned.

Lost your mind? he mouthed, looking absolutely dumbstruck. He motioned emphatically about. All these people??

No one can see, I mouthed back. Come here.

A glare. Sit. down.

I shook my head definitively, languidly pulling off my gloves, the whisky making me reckless. I slowly—oh so deliciously slowly—moved my hand downward, inching toward the hem of my gown. His eyes went wide, and I thought he was going to scold some more, but he only watched.

We’d done our best not to submit to complete celibacy as I’d healed from the birth, enjoying ourselves as best we could in stolen moments with hands and mouths. Even those non-penetrative forms of enjoyment had come with painful twinges and jarrings for me, though, and so we’d erred on the side of caution. Setting aside those attempts, it had been nearly six weeks since we’d last made love properly—and we both were more than hungry for it.

Though his posture was still proper, I could see the furtive movements of his hand as he watched mine pulling up the hem of my dress, inch by inch, and sliding between my thighs. A groan passed through his barely-parted lips as I found my mark and mouthed, COME. HERE.

Blazing need in his eyes, smoldering and growing under the whisky’s power. A flicker of doubt and concern as he asked, *....Can* we?

We bloody well could, finally, and not a day too soon. I didn’t say this aloud, only gave him a look and—with a raising of one knee— a view that answered the question in no uncertain terms.

He stood suddenly, keeping his eyes on the stage as he buttoned his tux coat casually. He turned and headed for the box door as though in need of the loo. Just as he reached the handle, getting out of the sightlines of the audience, he turned on a dime. An instant later, he was pressing me against the wall, hard, his mouth on mine.

GOD. YES. THIS.

Jamie was a man of great control, when called for. He delighted in tenderness and gentle service, and yet, in times like this, when he could unleash, not least of all after such a long deprivation—Jesus H. Roosevelt CHRIST.

His hand pushed mine away, and my knee came up again in reflex around his hip as I moaned—quietly, quietly—for what I wanted, and then he had two fingers inside of me and—

“Ye feel so good, mo nighean donn,” he growled with soft violence, his fingers stroking points inside and out at the same time making me gasp and moan see stars. I bucked against his touch, seeking more, demanding more, and he gave it. “Christ, to feel ye again—” His free hand moved hungrily over me, lips, shoulders, back, buttocks, arms, hair. The thrill of necessary silence—not to mention the sheer insanity of what we were doing in this revered landmark—had me moving like a wild
thing, silently keening, panting like I’d been running for miles. But oh, God—YES—

I gasped as I felt the tremors start, and I sunk my lips into his neck to keep from crying out as the glorious sensations ripped through me. His fingers were still stroking me within and without, his arm around my back tightening, hand gripping the back of my bared thigh, hard enough to bruise.

As the stars cleared and normal breath returned, I blinked, looked over Jamie’s shoulder.... then started giggling into his lapel. “*Not ‘no one.’”*

“What?” he demanded in an annoyed hiss, breathing heavily.

“*The oboist—has a mag—nificent—view.***

He swore under his breath and jumped back, clearly about to beat a hasty retreat toward propriety, but I would have none of that, and was already dragging him downward into the greater fray.

He opened his mouth to protest but I was faster. “On your back,” I said, low and commanding. “Right now.”

*That growl of lust—*

I was in no mood to tease, in no mood for anything except to have him, and as soon as he was bared, I did, that first rush of contact making us both gasp and groan. *SIX. BLOODY. WEEKS.*

My chest bent low over his so as not to be seen, I ground against him, using that extra contact to my advantage, taking twice for myself everything I gave, though I suspect I was giving him quite a lot. It hadn’t been mere banter, earlier—he *did* love to see me drunk, to watch my inhibition fall away, leaving only the pleasure-hungry beast within. He was watching me now, intently, his own drunken beast out in force, too. Without a single bloody sound, we were ravaging one another. Though I loved him with all my being, would cradle and gentle him forever, this wasn’t making love; this was *fucking,* hedonistic and violent, and I gloried in it.

In this drunken state of blazing euphoria, the pounding music seemed to come from within me, driving me to greater speeds—*con fuoco, indeed*—giving me that feeling of unbridled victory as I chased that wave, higher, higher, my toes curling and my skin igniting as—

*GOD.*

And so drunk was I on myself and the spasms ripping through me that I opened my eyes, met Jamie’s with fiendish delight, *and finished him,* nearly coming again myself to feel his release and his ecstatic groan vibrating through me with such intensity—

It truly was too bad that said groan coincided with the *very final* chord of the symphony. I had to fling myself forward and clamp hands over his mouth as the world’s tiniest *pianissimo* fermata—incidentally held by only two or three players—faded sloooooowly out into silence.

I could feel the thump of Jamie’s heartbeat in my body.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

And then, AT LAST, blessed applause.
“Well,” I sighed heavily at normal volume above the raucous ovation, leaning down and nipping Jamie’s slack lip mercilessly. “Sounds like they enjoyed the show too, mm?”
Cozy

Chapter Summary

Fluff fluff fluff ;)

*September, 1951*

“Da!! Da, can ye wrap me up like a tiny baby, too!??”

Jamie, who had been carefully unwrapping 8-week-old Ian on the sitting room floor after getting him out of the cradle, sat back on his haunches to raise an eyebrow at his daughter. “You? ‘Wee’? Have ye *seen* yourself lately, cub?”

She was growing like a weed, these days, tall for her age and solid as a summer foal.

She puffed out her chest proudly. “Yep! I’mma *weeeeeen* baby!”

“But you’re almost three!”

“Uh-huh!” she agreed, nothing daunted. “Wrap me up!! Please, Da? Wanna be like a tiny wee Beeyin!”

He studied her for a long moment. She’d been just that wee bit needy, the past week or two, getting fretful when too much attention was paid to the bairn. Ought he to take a firmer hand? He relented, though, for what was the purpose of denying the lass something so harmless as a wee bit of make-believe?

He caught up Ian’s blanket (quite a large thing, meant for wrapping several times about) and laid it out on the ground next to the babe. “Alright, then, wee bairnie, lay ye down.”

“Okay! I’m gonna do it!” Bree said excitedly, fastidiously narrating as she settled onto her bum. “I’mma lie down—on *the-this* sofffft cozy.”

“D’ye mean it is nice and cozy?” he gently prodded.

“NO,” the small pedant insisted with a glare as her head came to rest on the floor, hair haloed around her shoulders. “IS a cozy, Da.” She patted the fabric in indication. “See it?”

“Oh, aye, I do see it,” he said, manfully suppressing his urge to laugh. “Verra well, I’ll wrap ye up in yon...cozy.”

“Am I all wrappled up now?” she hissed a moment later, arms tucked in tight under the fabric. “Like Beeyin?”

“Aye, like the teensiest wee bairn I ever did see.”

That pleased her, and she immediately closed her eyes, feigning a delicate snore.
“Oh, LOOK, Ian,” Jamie said in a low whisper, punching the words for dramatic effect. “Your sister has fallen FAST ASLEEP.”

The sleeper’s eyes stayed closed but the sound of the snore contorted as she smiled, then suppressed it, lips trembling from the effort.

“Why, I’ll wager she’s SO deeply asleep,” he said, leaning forward to loom over her, “that she wouldna EVEN wake if I were to tickle ALL HER WEE RIBS.”

Which he did, and though Bree giggled and squealed and cackled like a maniac, she kept her eyes firmly closed.

He swept the bundled lass—though a bit less bundled now, for her arms had tugged loose in the silly struggle—up into his arms and cradled her like he would Ian. He rocked her for a moment, before saying quite seriously. “I love ye wi’ all my heart, wee Bree.”

She was still emitting little fizzling giggles, and STILL had her eyes closed, but she grinned and puckered her lips for a kiss, which he gave, first on her mouth, and then all over, tickling and kissing until Bree was nearly spent again from laughing.

Something caught Jamie’s eye, and he stilled at once. “Bree, look.”

She immediately lunged upward in Jamie’s arms to see, hair a wild mess. “What??”

Ian, who had been uncharacteristically slow to rouse from sleepiness, had opened his eyes properly and was staring up at them. Smiling up at them.

“What, Da?” Bree said, for Ian’s face shifted almost at once, brows drawing as he bucked his legs and made a sound almost like the start of a tantrum.

Jamie was starting to catch the way of the wee lad’s moods, though, and thought they were safe, for the moment. He carefully nudged forward, still holding Bree. “Iiian...?” he crooned softly, stretching his face into an over-exaggerated smile. “Ian, a bhailaich? Can ye smile for Da again?”

Right on cue, the brown-headed boy burst into a huge grin, cooing as he bounced his wee fists about, making both father and sister gasp and laugh. Shocked by the reaction, Ian curled up into a ball and started meditatively sucking on his sleeve.

“Beeyin,” Bree said, voice pitched impossibly high. “Can ye smile f’ME?”

The babe sneezed and tried to roll to the side, making the lass look up at Jamie in dismay.

“Try again, a leannan,” he said with a confident jerk of the head.

She climbed carefully out of his grip and knelt beside the wean, bringing along the blanket and putting it lovingly over his legs. “Beeyin?” she whispered, gingerly patting the round belly. “Here’s yer cozy—Can ye—”

And before she could even get the word out, the golden eyes settled on the blue, and there was a tiny, wee bit of magic that happened as brother and sister saw one another and both smiled.
A King on a Throne

Chapter Summary

Tumblr Prompt: @anne-hedonia said: ...I started wondering about Jamie’s reaction to more of the nuts and bolts of 20th century life, particularly the hygiene. (I know he’s way past that now, but maybe he and Claire could reminisce.) What did he think when he first saw a toilet? Did he think it was as great an invention as I would if I were stuck in the 18th century without one? (I’m not sure I could do the no-toilets-and-wiping-with-leaves thing, I’m just saying.)

October, 1951

“Mummy??!!! Mummy!! Mummm-meeeeeee!!???”

“What-ee-what-ee-what-eeeeee?” I chorused back from the kitchen.

I’d had the brilliant idea, in a burst of uncharacteristic domesticity, to try my hand at swiss roll this afternoon. It was NOT going well, so I was more than happy to turn from my own personal disaster area toward the pitter patter (well, more of a thundering) of little feet behind me.

“Mummy!!” Bree crowed as she zoomed across the linoleum and leapt into my arms, “I poo-pooed in the potty all-by-my-SELF!!!”

“You DID?” I cried, swooping her up. “Darling, that’s wonderful!”

“Oh-HUH! And Daddy didn’t even hafta tell me to!!!”

I kissed her exuberantly on both cheeks. “Well DONE, sweetheart!” This wasn’t feigned enthusiasm on my part, not in the slightest. Trying to get Bree out of nappies had been something of a saga over the last six months in the Fraser household.

I’d taken a high-minded notion, while pregnant, that under no circumstances were we going to have two children simultaneously in diapers; and two-and-a-half was a perfectly natural age to make the transition in any case. And so Jamie, Penelope, and I had all thrown massive energies into the imperative of getting Bree using the toilet before Ian was born.

Some children, as it turned out, though, were simply late bloomers when it came to changing their voiding routines. My child specifically seemed to be of the “I will die on this hill unbloomed from pure spite” genus.

It had been a constant rotation of ‘lessons,’ coaxing (read: bribes), endless sit-and-wait sessions as chaperone on the edge of the tub, cheerful reminders, tantrums, eagerly trying new strategies from books and friends, and the inevitable tearing out of our collective hair when she would have yet another accident, usually with impeccable cosmic timing, in public. To think we might actually have the knack of things now, then, would be a genuinely spectacular early birthday gift, and so I was just about as radiant as Bree at the news.

“I’m so proud of you, lovey!”
“FANKS!!”

Apparently done with congratulations, she wriggled down from my arms and went *mrooooming* back from whence she’d come, nearly careening into Jamie’s legs as she turned the corner into the hall.

He made her a leg with a courtly flourish to let her pass, shaking his head and grinning as he stepped through the doorway. “It’s almost a wee bit sad, to have her grow past it, no?”

“HA! NO! I’m over the *moon!*” I declared as I turned to see if I could salvage my failed roll. “Here’s hoping Ian is a tad more precocious, when it comes his time.”

We both snorted as a ‘Poo-pee-poooooo! Pee-poo-peeeeee!’ sounded out from across the house, to the jaunty tune of ‘Jingle Bells.’

“I *still* can’t for the life of me decide what it is that had her so hung up in the first place,” I lamented as I checked the backup sponge I’d prepared for just such eventualities. “I mean, she’s well ahead of most children her age in so many other aspects!”

“Well, and if she didna take to it at once, it’s no’ entirely without basis. *It is* a fearsome device, after all.”

“What, the toilet?” I laughed, taken aback, grinning at him over my shoulder as I tidied up a bit, waiting for the second sponge to cool.

“Aye, of course,” he said soberly with an eyebrow raised, as though taken aback in turn. “Do ye mean to say that you yourself were never afraid of the sound when it whisks away?”

“I mean, not that I can *recall*....What, are *you* scared of the flush?”

“Well, none so much NOW, ” he said with a defensiveness that made my cheeks twitch with glee, “but it’s relatively fresh in my mind, aye? I’ve been using one little more than a year, after all.”

“I suppose that’s right! Erm...*How did* you come to use one the first time, might I ask? Did you figure it out on your own?” I tried to make it a serious question and only half-succeeded. My voice trembled absurdly as my lips quivered. “Or did you have to have someone —*show* you—how?”

“T’was on my *own* merits, thank ye kindly,” Jamie said with a good-natured glare as he plunked down into a chair and put his feet up on the table. “Though I did have a bit of help to point me in the right direction, ken?”

“I don’t ken, but I’m ALL ears.”

“Let’s see, then...” He stretched luxuriously and ran his hands through his hair as he settled in for the tale. “I suppose it would have been....Aye, it *was* in Inverness. I’d come through the stones, and the American lads had given me a ride into town, some clothes and such. Early that next morning, there was the kind priest who counseled me and gave me help to get to Oxford.”

He’d told me the story, of course, and I found myself uttering a silent prayer for Jamie’s savior, whoever he was.

“Well, he could see that I hadna anything by way of means, and that I was out of my element, forbye. So, in addition to giving me money and a meal, he took me to an inn and arranged for me to have access to the facilities to wash and shave. The keeper showed me to the washroom and handed me a towel, and I thanked him, and he closed the door, and——” He laughed. “I think I just stood wi’
my gob hanging open for a time. Wasna sure where to begin in the great, shining place.”

I could just imagine Jamie Fraser, bedraggled and bewildered, trying to process all that tile and porcelain and gleaming metal with an eighteenth-century mind.

“My bowels must have taken the measure of the place better than my brain, though, for I quite suddenly found myself needing to, erm, well.... Let us say that urgent necessity prompted a verra rapid leap of faith.”

“Jolly good thing you didn’t shit in the sink! That would have been a bit awkward to explain to the innee——” I stopped and turned from my task of slathering filling on the cake. “You didn’t, did you?”

“Got it on the first try, thank Heaven. It was a matter of deduction, mostly. I could see that the tub was likely for washing the body (a good bit larger than those I’d used before, but still, it recalled the shape of a proper copper tub) and that the sink might resemble a basin on a washstand; so as for the toilet, it was more a process of elimination—no pun intended.”

“Victory!” I cried as the roll finally rolled without cracking.

“A small one, but a great relief it was, to be sure,” he agreed.

I rubbed my upper lip in an effort not to laugh. “So, what did you think of it? Once you’d, erm.... leapt?”

“Didna like the feel of the cold seat on my arse. I think I ended up squatting over it, more like...” He ran a hand over his stubbled chin, giving him the air of a professor, musing over some weighty theorem. “But, to be fair, I do recall a goodly sort of satisfaction in watching and hearing my offerings hit the water—like that lovely thunk when ye drop a stone in a deep pond.”

I choked on the scrap of cake I’d just popped into my mouth. “Glad it—” I wheezed crumbs into my windpipe and had to pound my chest and wipe my eyes. “—was a recreational experience, on top of—educational!” I shook with unbridled delight as I swallowed and leaned against the counter, grinning at him. “What did you think of the toilet paper?”

He sighed, enraptured. “I felt like a proper king. Most luxurious thing I’d ever heard of, using paper to wipe my arse! And SUCH paper—I thought it was fabric, at first! So soft, and gentle as a rose petal,” he intoned with a look of unequivocal bliss. “There are a good many things I miss about my own time, Sassenach, but cleaning myself wi’ leaves and plant matter isna one. I’ll always insist upon paying more at the shops for the thickest, softest stuff, even if I have to live on bread and water to accommodate such lavishness.”

“No need to give up steaks and fried potatoes just yet, don’t worry.”

He crossed one ankle over the other. “Mind, any enjoyment vanished rather quickly when confronted wi’ the question of what to DO wi’ the new contents.”

“Oh NO!” I groaned. “Oh, Jesus H Christ, tell me you didn’t—”

“Well, and I’d lived twenty-five years of my life emptying chamber pots, had I not? Or else seeing to my business in a privy or outdoors, at which point ye simply walk away! But it didna seem right to simply leave it thus, so stark against the white! There wasna a window in the room, thank God, else I might have tried to chuck it out by hand, but I did spend several minutes trying to see if I was supposed to detach the bowl in some way. It’s a true wonder I didna break it and flood the room! But finally,” he said, ratcheting up his volume to be heard over my cackling, “I ended up pushing down
the lever by accident, and had I not recently voided thoroughly, I might have wet myself over again from the shock of it! I still hate that sound when it echoes about the walls!”

It was a considerable passage of time before I was able to speak normally again, and even then, it was more of a hacking cough between sobs of laughter. “Quite an adventure you had, my love!”

“Indeed. The bath, though—that was an unmitigated delight.”

Roll cooling, I came over and melted onto his lap, triumphant on two fronts. “And HOW many times did I tell you so, back in the olden days?”

“Endlessly,” he conceded, pulling me close and kissing my neck, “and ye were perfectly right. Pure heaven.”

“I had to sit at the stones, that first time, and seriously think about hot baths—whether I could give them up forever, for you.”

“Well, I’m most flattered,” he said, pressing slow, warm kisses along my jawline. “Though, I willna lie to ye: I would give YOU up in a heartbeat if it meant I could have toilet paper forever.”

“Arse,” I murmured against his lips, which were tight with a grin, like mine.

“Aye, the very one.”
The Bairn

In the wee hours of December 3, 1951

He couldn’t move. Everything, all their lives, depended on it, and the guilt and terror—

The walls of the wardrobe—

— Redcoats, just outside—

—And the knowledge: he had brought them down upon the house. Everyone would die because of him. The bairn would die.

He had the tiny thing clutched tight in his arms, willing all his strength into keeping it safe, into hushing its heartbreaking cries. This new joy was in danger, and if his life were meant for no other deed than this, he must not let the child come to harm.

And yet there was nothing he could do.

The powerlessness, the dread of it had him weeping into the soft, downy hair, silently, shaking, covering the child and waiting for the bayonet of an English sol—

“Jamie?”

He jumped. It was English, the voice, sharp. He curled deeper over the bairn.

“Jamie?”

Why could he not fight? Why would he only cower and weep?

A hand on his knee; another atop his hand that cradled the wailing child’s head.

“You’re awake. You’re safe.”

He wasn’t.

He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t let them take—

“You’re in Boston…1951….You’re home.”

He felt the woman settle on the floor beside him, facing him, her cool hand touching his face, her arms going around them.

“I won’t let anything happen, love.”

He might have been asleep, there in the tub, except that I could see his knuckles, whiter than the porcelain.

God, he had looked so small, on the closet floor. The way he’d been holding Ian to his bare chest,
curled in upon himself, turned away so that the claws of whatever beast or foe would tear him before the baby.

I’d stayed there on the ground with him, stiff and terrified but holding him fiercely while he’d wept, not daring to move my hands until he’d stirred again. The look in his eye when he had, after Ian had fallen asleep—it had terrified me still more, as though he didn’t know quite who I was.

He’d briefly let his fingers trail across my shoulder after he’d risen and put Ian back in the cradle, but he didn’t speak, not even as he walked away.

The echo of his dream had gripped my heart as I sat helplessly on the carpet, heart racing long past the time I’d heard the bath being drawn. What had he been dreaming of, I’d wondered. Something had frightened him, and badly, yet he’d said not a single word. Would he tell me, if I asked? Ought I to? Or was it better to let the ghost of it vanish into the night?

I still wasn’t certain, but he spared me having to choose. When he opened his eyes from the bathtub, he immediately held out a hand to me, inviting me into the darkness still pressing in around his mind.

The tub was large, but so was he, and I was obliged to settle more on top of him than beside. He didn’t seem to mind; he only turned on the tap with his foot until we were both covered securely in the water’s warmth, and held me. Held onto me. My hand slid slowly down between his legs, gently holding him there. I didn’t intend it to arouse or distract him. Perhaps I only wanted to reach the most intimate part of him I could, to have him know he was safe. His own hand came up to my nape, the big thumb behind my ear, warm, trembling.

“Even despite the fact,” he whispered much later, his forehead against mine, “that it meant missing Brianna’s birth; that I ought never to have seen you again in life—I will never regret sending ye away when I did.”

The breath knocked out of me as the shape of his dream began to take form in my mind.

His voice broke. “We wouldn’a have survived the Clearances, had ye stayed.”

I reached up and touched his face. I wanted to declare it maudlin nonsense—that of course we would have made do and had our life together, no matter the circumstances; but he was right. Given the direness of that November morning three years ago (and that in a modern hospital), either I or Bree would surely have died had she been born in the eighteenth century; and even if not, I knew the horrors and tragedies that would have marred our life as a family. Having Bree grow up with her father in hiding would have broken all of our hearts, day after day. Jamie would have taken risks to be near us as often as possible, putting him and me and Jenny’s family all the more at risk from Redcoat incursions. Our joy would have been so strangled, in that place and time, so tempered by war and hunger and constant fear; by hopelessness.

“Do you pray, Claire?”

The question, asked plainly, with no sense of being rhetorical, took me aback enough that I couldn’t respond. When my choked throat cleared and I could have spoken, I was no closer to an answer.

I did find myself uttering prayers now and again, usually by habit, or else in times of great desperation, but I couldn’t say with complete truth, most days, that I believed in an answering power. I believed deeply in the comfort and strength of hope in itself, yes, but true belief came far less easily to me than to Jamie. I very often envied him that faith, the surety it could give. I couldn’t answer, not if it would take away his hope tonight.
Jamie, though, didn’t need my answer, not to that question, anyway.

“Will ye hold Jenny and her bairns wi’ me in your heart, tonight?”

I laid my head over his heart, holding him as he let his brokenhearted wishes whisper out into the night, my own wrapped tight around them as we both spoke peace and safety toward Lallybroch.

Aberdeenshire, 1935

“But Mamm…,” the little girl whined, louder than she knew she ought, “Why do I have to stay? Can I no’ just go in the other room and listen to Children’s Hour??”

“Your grandfather doesna have a wireless, Cait,” Mam hissed, looking for a moment over her shoulder to smile a fake smile at Grandda. “And for Christ’s sake, keep your voice d—”

“We’ve been here for HOURS alrea—”

“HUSH, NOW.” She looked about furiously before pulling a few old books from the shelf by the sofa. “Sit quiet and practice reading your letters.”

“I ken how to read, Mam,” Cait scoffed, now annoyed on top of being bored to death. “I’m eight bloody years old, for f—”

“We’ll be leaving in twenty minutes,” Mam snapped in that whisper that wanted to be a screech, “but if I hear one more peep out of you, young lady—least of all with such filthy language— we’ll stay another hour. Understood?”

Cait made a face at the back of her mother’s head and thumped her back hard against the sofa cushions in protest. Canna peep, but she didna say anything about THUDDING, now, did she?

Still, after a minute of secret sighing, the boredom crept in—Hell, did Grandda have to drone on and on all the time?— and she reluctantly opened the cover of the top book on her lap.

It was a Bible, which ordinarily Cait wouldn’t have bothered with, having quite enough of that at church, thank you very much, but someone had written in it by hand, and that she liked. She made a point of doing so herself, in fact. She lived for Sundays, if only for seeing which old lady would suddenly gasp in the middle of the sermon and slam her pew Bible closed, turning all red and twitchy-eyed.

The ones in this Bible weren’t rude words or jokes, though, just names and dates for people that were born or died in Grandda’s family a long, long time ago.

Her eyes went almost at once to that one particular line, and it gave her such a delicious, spooky thrill to see her own name—except for the middle one; hers was Jane—coming out of the past:

Caitlin Maisri Murray
Cait (maybe she *would* let people start calling her Caitlin again, she thought) had to peer hard at the page to read the year. It was smudged pretty badly, but she was almost sure of it, at least the first two numbers:

—1816.
Fluff

Chapter Summary

no really. that's the title

January, 1952

“Sassenach? Christ, are ye ill?”

Still hazed in sleep, he reached for his wife and pulled her closer to him underneath the blankets.

“Not ss-sick... Colllld.” she whispered, and in truth, he could feel her jaw thudding against his chest like a hammer. “You’re nn-not??”

A second later and a tentative hand out from under the blankets had him up on his feet, cursing the bloody Heating system in all the languages he possessed.

“Again?” Claire moaned, coming out from under the blankets. “It peters out last week, and now has the gall to—Oh, bloody hell, honestly?”

For the vain click-click-click of the lamp switch under Jamie’s fingers had just proclaimed it to be a Very Inconvenient Night.

There was no repairman that would travel out in this weather, he knew as he looked out the window, with eight inches of snow on the ground, more falling, and ice slicking every surface in sight, forbye.

He opened his mouth to curse, to vent the boiling up of frustration and indignation against the storm and foul machines both—

But quite of a sudden, he was smiling, feeling his chest swelling with something like excitement. Contentment, bordering on insouciance.

He’d lived without Power or Heating for twenty-seven years, had he not?

“Daddy? Da-ddy, can we have marsha-mellows?”

“Wait a moment, Bree. Down ye go, lad,” Jamie groaned, lowering Ian into Claire’s arms where she lay on the sofa with Bree at her feet, one and all swaddled in wool sweaters and caps under a nest of blankets. He gave the heavy-laden piece of furniture one final nudge closer to the fire.

“Not too close!” Claire cried, above Bree’s whining.

“Just getting it squared up, mo chridhe, dinna fash. ‘Tis warm enough?”

“Yes! Nice and toasty, as long as we don’t catch a spark and become toast ourselves!”

Though the air of the sitting room was still frigid, at five or six feet from the fire, the sofa formed a
sort of shell that captured the heat perfectly. Claire’s concern about sparks was not in the least bit frivolous, but as long as he kept watch, the configuration should do nicely to keep them all from freezing like Bree’s favorite Ice Pops in the night. And speaking of Brianna....

“DAAAAAAA-DEEEEE?”

“Sorry, lass, I forgot. Dinna raise your voice to Mummy or Da, though, aye?” He leaned his elbow on the sofa back and reached down to ruffle her hair reassuringly. “Now....Do we have marshmallows to hand?”

“Oh-huh!” she cried, already clambering down in excitement and pattering toward the kitchen door. “And we can have s’mores of them!”

He followed and opened the door for her. “Mind, ye have to have some before ye can have some more, cub.”

She spun on her heel by the cupboard. “No, Da, it’s suhh-MORRRRRRES-uhhh.”

He turned and raised an eyebrow at Claire over his shoulder. “Do you ken what she’s talking about?”

“Haven’t the foggiest.”

A few minutes later, though, and three-year-old Bree had led them all into the magical realm of graham cracker-chocolate-marshmallow bliss, something Mrs. Byrd had apparently once made her.

Jamie already had (he was slightly sheepish to admit) a startlingly-intense love for marshmallow, having been captivated completely from that very first Mallow Cup. White and soft and sticky and sweet, it was nothing like marshmallow leaf tea—it was heaven, like reaching up to taste the very clouds. A fanciful thought, but no less true in the experience. And heated, with the chocolate melting all over and soaking into the biscuit—

“Forget ‘s’mores,’” he said, licking his fingers as he polished another off, “I’ll have ‘s’m-all-of-them.’”

Bree glared from where she sat beside him on the hearth rug, leaned against the sofa. “Nuh-uh, Da, I am!”

He made a show of trying to gobble up the rest of her treat, getting a very sticky palm thrust in his face for his trouble. She’d make a fine American Football player one day, he thought, if the photographs in the newspapers were any indication.

“Did you know they make a marshmallow creme?”

“A what?”

"It spreads like butter!” Claire said, accepting the third ‘s’more’ he passed up to her. “Della has peanut butter and Fluff sandwiches every day for her lunch.”

“Well that’s it, then,” he replied with grim resignation.

“What’s what?”

“This is the day James Fraser lost his figure and became a lifelong roly-poly of a—Ohhhh, no ye don’t, a bhlaiach.”
Ian, who had been dozing in Claire’s lap after nursing and a few messy bites of graham cracker, had suddenly lunged toward the edge of the sofa. Jamie twisted to catch him up under the oxters, then stood, dusting crumbs off himself and letting the fire warm his backside.

“Christ, but you’re getting big, sweet lad.”

“Not as big as me, though,” Bree said, the wee puffball at the peak of her cap wobbling.

“No, certainly not,” Claire promised. “Here, lovey, come snuggle with me.”

Satisfied, Bree obliged. Ian chewed on two fingers as he grinned up at Jamie, milky saliva flowing down his chin.

“What do ye think about being up so late, Ian?”

“Guergh,” he said definitely.

“Oh, aye? Geurgh? Canna just say you’re wrong.”

Ian beamed ecstatically at the pleasure of being understood, and the fist went back in his mouth with a happy, “Gnumm, gnumm, gnummmm—”

“Gnumm yourself.”

The bairns were soon fast asleep, snoring like wee pups on their respective parental shoulders.

Easing one final log onto the fire with his free hand, Jamie held Ian’s capped head and settled down onto the opposite end of the sofa. He gingerly stretched his legs out beneath the blankets, stockinged-feet just barely fitting in the narrow swath of cushion beside Claire’s bum.

Claire suddenly jerked awake and—very thoughtfully for someone still half-asleep—pushed the blanket securely under his heels to keep them from sliding off.

He mouthed a silent, heartfelt thanks, and she smiled back, sweet and sleepy and perfect. He didn’t take his eyes from her as her own slowly ebbed closed again, graceful arms tender; strong and protecting, even in sleep.

Not for the first time, Jamie felt the keenness of the loss of music from his life.

Moments like these, the long, silent hours of watch-keeping, all but cried out for song.....the quiet sort; the powerful tales and promises of the Highlands, given life by rhythm and plaintive melody.

He spoke the promises, all the same—the tune alive and true, if only in his own memory—letting them bless the cold night and the warmth they’d found.
Big Top

Chapter Summary

A Tumblr anon suggested (long ago): "Flood My Mornings. Cannot get enough of this. Not sure if you’re taking prompts for this, but what about Claire taking both Brianna and Jamie to the movies for the first time. Small kids get so wide eyed at movies, thought Jamie might too??"

February, 1952

It honestly was a shame that we couldn’t tell anyone about the whole time-traveling bit, because I could have made a barrel of money selling National Geographic the exclusive rights to ‘eighteenth-century warrior-type experiences moving pictures for the first time.’ While I was at it, might as well phone Dr. Spock, for Bree’s experience was almost as entertaining to watch as her father’s.

At the very first shot of the big-top, she had gasped, transfixed in pure delight in her seat between Jamie and me. The Greatest Show on Earth had seemed a safe choice for breaking them both into the world of cinema: no ghouls or goblins or wicked witches to give them nightmares. Besides, carnivals were familiar enough to Jamie so as not to be completely shocking.

So I had supposed.

In actuality, Jamie had gasped in perfect unison with his daughter, but in quite a different tone. The gasp had coincided with a JUMP, sending half the carton of popcorn flying in a glorious arc, the entire dance scored by the cheery fanfare of trumpets blasting over the speakers. Jamie had had the good sense to hand the carton to me immediately for safekeeping thereafter as the opening montage progressed, but our snack was still in some danger of spilling over, because I was barely keeping my giggles contained.

His arms were crossed and he was hunkered down a bit in the seat, like a sinner in church, one hand coming up to halfway cover his mouth. His shoulders were up around his ears in hopes of blocking out the sound. Eyes fixed on the projection screen and WIDE AS THE ENGLISH CHANNEL in a half-dazed sort of horror, he was like someone under the influence of a very overwhelming sort of drug.

It was a lot to take in, I supposed, trying to see it through his eyes. There was the Technicolor (which still felt incredible to ME!), the acrobats doing their amazing feats (a half-clad woman was twirling about a pole held up only by her TEETH for Christ’s sake), the elephants and clowns, the omniscient voiceover and blaring of music, and most of all, the rapid shot changes wiping across the screen and presenting a new visual landscape for processing every several seconds. Those could make anyone a bit queasy, let alone a First-Class Landlubber, who was currently as green as the seat cushions.

“Bree,” I whispered, eager to hear her take, “what do you think?”

“It’s—IT’S SO NEAT!!”

I tried to shush her, but she was too excited, positively ecstatic as she turned to Jamie in
raptures. “Da, do ya like it?!?”

“mnuhnhhh...”

“That means ‘yes,’ lovey.”

I grinned over her head, then whispered to him with more genuine concern, “Are you going to be alright, darling?”

Jamie made as though to respond but apparently couldn’t pull his eyes away, and so only vaguely moved his head in circles, giving no indication if he was nodding or shaking it. He might not have known himself, to be honest.

Bree, a very perceptive person even at three, stood on her knees (nearly getting pancaked by the spring-action seat for her trouble) and patted him clumsily on the chest.

“Da, are you scairt of the moofie?”

He blinked, then smiled sheepishly (a very nauseated sheep). “A wee bit, cub. Are you?”

“Nope, but I can hold-a your hand, if ya want.”

“....Yes, please.”
March, 1952

It truly is uncanny, that supernatural power that comes with having children: the moment you endeavor to switch things up a bit, to invite friends over for dinner, to be just that tiny bit spontaneous, everything goes to pot in a New York minute.

I’d seen Marian at the end of my shift and happily-heedlessly made the invitation for that very evening. She’d readily accepted, said she’d be there in a few hours with Tom, and that was that. I spent the bus ride home mentally formulating the menu, and thought it would be a relatively simple affair.

Except, the bus ended up being seriously delayed due to traffic, putting me home extremely late. Penelope had been terribly apologetic about it, but had had to leave as soon as I stepped over the threshold. I hadn’t even the basic forethought to phone ahead and get her to go to the market, so I’d had to bundle up both children into the car; haul them around the market while I tried to remember my mental ingredients list; apologize to the other shoppers for my brood’s caterwauling, for neither was on their best behavior (Ian was cutting a tooth and making sure the world knew it); apologize to the manager when Bree managed to upset a giant pyramid of oranges; haul both tiny terrors back to the house along with the groceries; unbundle both babes and bags in the freezing rain that had had the gall to start up during the drive; set Ian down for a nap; start preparing the recipe; set Bree up in the living room with a coloring book; greet Jamie as he got home from Fernacre; appraise him of the night’s plans, and ask (beg) for help in getting the house presentable; smell something burning; sprint back to the kitchen; try to salvage the burnt onion gunk from the stovetop....

....and that’s when Bree staggered into the kitchen, bawling her eyes out.

“What’s wrong?” I said, glancing over to make sure she wasn’t bleeding, which was today’s bar for toddler catastrophes. I mean, she’d been howling in some fashion for the better part of the last hour, after all, so I didn’t feel too terribly about being rather cursory in asking, “Did you hurt yourself?”


I transferred the hurriedly-scrubbed pan back to the stove. “Alright then, why are you crying?”

Cough. Sob. Wail: “—the—CRAYONNNnnnnn—”

I forced a deep breath. “What about your crayon, darling?”

Higher, louder wail. “I DINNA—LIKE THE—GREEN ONE—”

“You don’t—What??”

Just then, Jamie walked in, broom and dustpan in hand, with a dustbunny clinging to his 5 o’clock shadow. At the same time, Ian started screeching from his crib in the room he and Bree now shared. Distracted by the chorus of cries now echoing round the house like some hellish opera, Jamie stared blankly at Bree for a minute before blinking and scooting around her, heading to the dustbin.

“What’s got ye upset, cub?” he asked over his shoulder, for once sounding as impatient as me. Good not to be the only parent at the end of one’s rope.

“That—GREEN—W—W—ONNNNE,” Bree sobbed, her face red as an apple and streaming with
Jamie threw a harried glance at me. “What’s she—?”

“A green crayon is upsetting her for some reason? I think?” I sighed as I tried to salvage my recipe.

“Then dinna use the green one,” Jamie said, matter-of-fact, putting away the broom and looking for a clean rag.

“I CANNA DINNA USE IT,” she wailed stamping up and down in her despair, “IT—NEEDS—A—GREEEEEEEN.”

“Find another type of green, then, lass. There’s a whole box, no?”

“NOOO, that’s not.... the thing!!” she cried, her hands coming up around her face, “I CANNA—”

“Brianna,” Jamie said sharply, stooping down and looking her directly in the eye. “Mummy and Da are very busy just now trying to get the house ready for Tom and Marian.”

“I NEED A—”

“—Ye need to go be quiet somewhere until we have things in hand, aye? Can ye be a big lass and do that?”

She sobbed harder, her little mouth wrenching up into a perfect, comical rainbow arc. Jamie gave her a quick kiss on the head, then a nudge toward the door. “Go on, now, mo chridhe.”

She staggered back out, bouncing off the frame in her distraught state.

“Thank you,” I said, genuinely, if a bit frazzled as I stirred my new concoction. “I did not have the patience to coax out what exactly the green crayon had done to offend her. How much time do we have?”

“Thirty-five minutes,” he said, checking his watch. “What else can I do?”

“Oh, let me think...!” I had to raise my voice over the screeching of both children, which had suddenly spiked, persistent as air raid sirens. “The 12 or 93 other things I forgot were undone when I heedlessly invited friends over?”

“It’ll be an enjoyable evening, once it’s begun,” he said firmly, kissing me quickly on the cheek before moving to wash his hands. “It’s been too long since we hosted them.”

“Let’s hope they like scalded chowder.”

“They’ll be kind, no matter what, but I’m sure you’re no’ giving yourself enough credit.”

“I’m SURE you’re wrong,” I groaned, wrinkling my nose as I lifted the lid off the pot, then replaced it quickly in denial.

We both rushed about madly, trying to finish the final tidying, I to prepare the rest of the food. Que sera, sera on that front.

I caught sight of Jamie’s watch and gasped. “DAMN it, and I still need to bathe, and....”

“What is it?” he said warily, cocking his head at my abrupt silence.
“...Why is it so quiet?”

“No, Ian,” Bree was saying firmly, pulling the cardboard book out of his mouth and lifting it back up above their heads. “Gotta read, no’ eat it.”

We were standing in the doorway of the children’s room, unseen, getting to be flies on the wall for this tableau.

Bree had apparently managed to monkey-climb up into Ian’s crib. She was down on her back next to him, her feet propped up against the back wall of the crib. She had brought a picture book, and was “reading” to him, a little schoolmistress diligently instructing her protégé.

“And-then, the kitties all ran around the grass....Kitties say meeeeee-owww, okay? Say it!”

Ian gurgled and cooed, entranced by his sister’s sense of command.

“Okay, you can do it later....” A turned page. “But the black kitty was sayin’ ‘Mee-ow-halloooo, all the kitten-friends! Wanna come play on the treehouse?’ And-then all the kittens-friends say ‘AYE! LET’S DO IT!’ and-then they go over up the treehouse and they’re all excited to eat cookies and milkshakes, and THEN ac-shully what-had-happened-was—”

Even though we were both sweaty from chores, even though guests would be arriving in a twinkling, even though God-knew-what-mayhem was unfolding on the stovetop, neither Jamie nor I seemed able to drag ourselves away from the utter sweetness of that little brown head curled right up next to the red one.
Found

Chapter Summary

Thank you for bearing with me while I’ve taken a wee ten month sabbatical! And thank you, too, for dropping in every now and again to remind me of how much you love this story. It means the world! - With love, Bonnie

Early December, 1952

“Hey, Mummy?”

“Yes, pumpkin?”

“Um! Why come—”

“How....”

“—How come my hairs is all gray in all tha’ pictures?”

One grammar victory at a time.

“Cameras only can show things in black and white. Ours, anyway.”

Taking pictures was always great fun; poring over them once they’d come back from the developer, a joy, particularly coupled with Jamie’s still-sharp wonder in their implicit magic. Actually following through with organizing them into albums, though? A bloody-hateful chore I’d managed to put off for nearly a year, this time. The red album already held Ian’s first six months or so, but most of his subsequent life had accumulated in lazy shoeboxes and (better late than never) now lay scattered around Bree and me in a shiny arc on the living room floor.

“Wouldn’t them—those pictures be better if it was all the right ones?” She popped up from hands and knees to shove a fistful of ginger curls toward me. “The good colors?”

“Absolutely! Maybe someday.”

She nodded once, satisfied. “You should go tell them to.”

“Tell who?”

Shrug. “Camera people.”

“I’ll write Mr. Kodak right away.”

“Good. Which picture’re we doin’ next?”

“Hmmm....” It came out more like a ‘heeeeeee’, since I was grinning with complete, albeit exhausted joy at my unstoppable eldest.
“How ‘bout THIS one?” She came up with a snapshot from the Fernacre Halloween party this year: Jamie beaming as he held Ian securely atop Kugel, one of the newer horses.

“Oh,” I moaned, heart squeezing as I held the photo next to the page showing Ian at four months, fuzzy-headed and drooling happily with his hands clapped together. “Bree, when did my tiny baby become a grown-up boy?”

“He izzzz a baby, Mummy.”

“Well, yes, but....”

But oh lord, to see his infant photos again, compared with the walking, sometimes-talking little man across the house! Where had all the baby fat gone? When had the generic softness of his features been replaced with cheekbones and Jamie’s dimpled chin?! Jesus H. Christ, it made me want to curl up and sob for days and then get down to business making another one. (Except, no, absolutely not).

“He IS a real baby,” Brianna was saying, with a sass that spilled over into guilty-glee: “He still poopies in his pants!”

“Touché, lovey,” I giggled along with her, rifling through our pile to make sure I hadn’t missed any from Ian’s birthday. “OH! This is pure Ian, right here, don’t you think??”

This was from just last week, from the packet Jamie had picked up on his way home yesterday. No special occasion: just our sweet, sweet boy standing in the doorway to the back garden, beaming with a magnetic smile even as he shyly resisted any coaxing to come out, blanket over his shoulder and pressed comfortingly against his cheek.

Somehow, he alone had managed to miss the gene for curly hair. His was still thick, though, brown and unruly as mine, with a tendency to poke up in little cowlicks every time you turned your back (and good bloody luck to anyone that tried to come at him with a comb and triggered a caterwauling to wake the dead). His eyes—dark honey—were slanted, seeming even more so as he grinned at the camera. So like Bree and yet so much his own.

Resemblance wasn’t the only difference between my little ones, for Ian was less tempestuous than Brianna, to say the very least. Whereas she had seemed to exit the very womb inclined to speak (or howl) her mind with a fierce, vocal confidence in herself, Ian Fraser was a more subtle charmer. He got what he wanted by lavishing snuggles and carefully-placed puppy-dog eyes on his target, speaking his few words when necessary, but usually content to wheedle in his own way, or else let Bree do the talking for him.

His own unique spirit, I marveled, running my thumbs against the glossed edges. Bree was, in a word, intense; her brother..... what? More shy by contrast, absolutely, but I’d always hated the milquetoast connotations of that word. He wasn’t at all skittish or morose; when in his element, he could be as boisterous as she, and if he sometimes preferred to play by himself in a group of friends, it always seemed to be by choice, not exclusion. In fact, I’d observed that he even spoke more when on his own, when he was absorbed in organizing a Gathering of the cuddly toys, or making tiny stick-villages in the garden, narrating his playtime in a mixture of English, Gaelic, and (the vast majority) Toddler. It was only when someone was watching that he would flash them a sheepish grin and start keeping his thoughts to himself.

No, see, Ian’s quieter nature bespoke something beneath it, something that always struck me as remarkably developed and complex for a child of his age. Cunning, I’d call it, or some deep, satisfied knowing—slyness, in the best way! His twinkling eyes often seemed to so, so sweetly say, ‘You can’t make me do what you want, Mummy, but I sure do enjoy watching you try!’ A strain of
“Hey-Mummy?” My little Fraser had her brows scrunched up as though contemplating murder, poring over the blue album from the shelf under the coffee table. “I dinna remember this pictures.”

“Those are of you as a baby,” I grinned, “so you were too small to remember.”

“Well...then...Da! He must—!” She nodded, full of budding conviction. “He remembers a whole, whole-lot, then, cause he’s really big!”

“Ah—” My lips hurt as little fizzes escaped from between them. “You’re not wrong, smudge.”

“Uh-huh, I know.”

She had flipped open to the middle of the album, to a series of snowy shots taken when she was...what...sixteen months old? We had gone sledding for the first time, and Ms. Byrd had captured the fleeting joy of it so perfectly. Little Bree’s jack-o-lantern teeth bared in glee above her muffler, the point of her elf-bonnet tickling my chin. My own hat had flown off into the wind, curls a blurry cloud above us.

She turned the pages to the left, going back in time. Cackles erupted at the images from her first birthday, elbows and eyebrows deep in chocolate cake, then she straightened gravely at the evidence of some of her exuberant early steps. “Was I walkin’ as good as Ian?” she dared me.

“Very well! Though he did start sooner.”

“Hey-Mummy?”

I inhaled through a secret, tired smile. Eighteen hundred times a day. At least. “Yes, Bree?”

“Hey-Mummy, where’s Da?”

“Putting Ian to bed.” I glanced at my watch. “Which means you, sweet pea, need to get your pajamas on, and—”

“NO, where is he in heee-rrrrre?” She lifted the album, glaring. “Where I was the baby?”

My jaw was open as though I’d started to say something. If only I knew what it might have been. Maybe then I’d know what came next.

“See-look,” she insisted, turning the thick pages of the other album and pointing emphatically.

Jamie, showing Ian around the house on the first day he’d come home with us.

Ian, in my arms in the hospital bed with Jamie at my shoulder, smiling down at us with Bree on his lap.

She thunked the album down, half on top of the other, contrasting the very first family photos I possessed: just the two of us, meeting one another in the morning light of that lonely, heavenly hospital room. “Where’s the Da-ones for me, Mummy?”

“Da...he...”

Damn it.

“....He wasn’t there when you were a baby.”
Brianna blinked twice, and her eyes went fierce as she cocked her head. “Wasn’t?”

“No. He wasn’t.”

“Why wasn’t he?”

“He was away at—at the war when you were born.”

Seeing the questions stacking up behind her eyes, I tried to explain, though my blood was thudding in my ears. “You know how Miss Della’s beau Peter is a soldier? And how he has to be away in Korea? That's like where Daddy was, too. He…” My voice cracked a little. “He was away, and didn’t get to meet you until you were Ian’s age.”

“Da was-not away!” Bree insisted, though her eyes were wide, unaccustomed doubt creeping in.

“He was, though, darling,” I whispered. “You don’t remember because you were still very little when he came back.”

I turned the pages slowly, past those scattered glimpses of our early days, when we were the Randalls, then the Beauchamps. “Da was—” Goddamn it, what was the bloody story? “—captured, and we were told he died.”

I thought she hadn’t heard me. I cleared my throat and started to repeat myself, more audibly this time, but I glanced down and my heart clenched so hard the tears broke through. “....Daddy died?”

“No! No, no, no, sweetheart, he didn’t, but he was….lost....for a long time.”

She sucked in a breath, almost a gasp, all trace of fierceness gone as she searched my face. “Was he scared?”

I could only nod, the tears stinging, squeezing the walls of my throat. “But, one day, he did come back. He found us and he got to meet you. His wee lassie. See?”

*Jamie, on our second wedding day, so very thin in his suit, but glowing as he held little Bree in his arms, looking down at her with unrestrained, awestruck tenderness.*

“You made him — make him — so happy, lovey,” I whispered, pulling her close onto my lap and against my heart as I turned the page.

*The two of them, stretched out on this very couch, both their mouths open as they slept, her cheek smushed cozily against his chest.*

I pressed my own cheek against her head. “He’d loved you the whole time he was lost. Getting to finally meet you was....” I flipped over to Ian’s first photos, pointing to Jamie. “Just like how happy he was here, when he met baby Ian for the first time.”

“Mummy....I dinna—” Her voice was choked, tears streaming as she whispered: “I dinna w-want Da to be lost when I w-was Ian.”

“Ohh, love, sweetheart, I—”

The door from the kitchen opened. “Alright, Bree, *your* turn for—”

“DA!”
By long instinct, he dropped to a crouch to let her run, sobbing, into his arms. “Christ, what's this, then, cub?” He rubbed her back, coaxing brightly to ease her worries, his expert skill. “Heyyy, lass, there, now.....Dinna be troubled so, wee love—tell me what’s amiss.”

She couldn't say anything coherent at first, but at last, she choked it out. “I dinna want—y-you to b-be—lost again!”

“I'm no’ lost, Brianna,” he nearly laughed. “I'm here, see? Safe and—”

“Mu—Mummy said you were dead and l-lost when I was littlest and—I don't—dinna—w-want—you —to—ever—”

“Och, no, lass,” he moaned at once as he pulled her tight against his chest and rose to his feet, his eyes meeting mine with an understanding that ached in us both as he saw the tracks of my own tears. “Never. Not ever.”

He swayed with her for a very long time as she sobbed into his shoulder. His eyes were closed and I could barely hear what he murmured into her hair:

“That was the saddest time of my whole life, mo chridhe....” In Gaelic: ‘I'll never be parted from ye again...nor your mother... nor Ian.....I swear it.’

“Shes truly growing up, then,” Jamie whispered, softly rubbing Brianna’s back where she lay curled up asleep on the sofa behind us. “That she can feel things so in her heart.....” He turned from her to lean fully against the bottom cushions, resting his arms on his knees. “It makes me want to weep, Sassenach. All the sadness that awaits them in the world....That I could keep all of it at bay.”

“Will we ever tell them differently?”

His head swiveled around, surprised. “Tell them what, mo ghraidh?”

“The truth.” The word was a ball of ice in my stomach. “About....everything. The stones... How we met. Who you really are.”

“I confess....I had assumed we never would tell them.”

“When it was only me and Bree, I had thought...well, it was a vague thought, only....but I assumed someday she would know. Now, though....it doesn’t seem as simple, somehow.”

“Aye.” His chest rose and fell heavily as he ran a hand backward through his hair. “In truth, ‘tis indeed a weight on my heart to think that they might never know all the dear memories—only the wee fragments, disguised as they must be.”

About Lallybroch. Jenny and Ian. All their little cousins. Murtagh. Brian and Ellen. Names the children knew, but only a surface-version; a bedtime story about people in a faraway land who were now lost; no more real than any other; far less so, with no photographs or brightly-colored illustrations to prove those people had existed.

Still more....might they never know what their father did for them at Culloden? Of the sacrifice and pain we both chose on that day?

“But we must bear it, no?” he was saying sadly, even as a half-hope grew in his eyes.
“How can they ever truly know us, Jamie,” I said, “understand us without knowing where we’ve been? What we’ve been through?” I thought of my own parents, shrouded in so much mystery, so much not known; unknowable, now.

“Perhaps...when they’re older? When they might be trusted to keep such a big secret, we might tell them. Though....” he considered. “They might both be fully grown before t’would be the right time for such a—"

“And yet, that’s the other side of the coin.” I hated this; scolded myself for being the devil’s advocate of cloying gloom. “It’s like adopted children that aren’t told until adulthood. If we wait so long, won’t they resent us for keeping such a monumental thing from them? The truth of who they are and how they came to exist?” My eyes must have looked as hopeless as Bree’s. “What do you think we should do?”

A pause, then his mouth twitched in a weak attempt at a smile. “I wish I kent the certain path, Claire. I do.” Any light in his eyes ebbed. “In truth, we rob them — and ourselves, forbye — of something dear no matter the choice, aye?”

It might have lingered, the worry. It might have been a cloud over us throughout the fallen night. Instead, our eyes met and we softened in unison. He leaned his forehead against mine, pulling me closer to kiss my cheek. Many years stood between us and that day, should it ever even come.

I was about to rest my head on his shoulder, but a photo caught my eye, right there by my ankle.

It was barely in focus, fully half the image a diagonal, black nothingness, a childish finger covering the lens. Still, it had been captured at precisely the right moment, before Jamie or I had had time to react.

*Both of us were in pajamas in front of the stove, my hair an absolute wreck (though, when was it not?), the cup of tea in my hand in serious danger of slopping over the side, since Jamie had me by the waist and was working to pull me close. His head was bent to my neck, his grin sweet and roguish, though his eyes were hidden. Mine were closed and my head was thrown back, as though no other damn thing in the world mattered but the moment’s silly joy.*

I cradled it between us and spoke the simplest version of the ache within me.

“I’m so happy you’re not lost anymore.”
“Can’t you stay home this morning?” she wheedled, wiping maple syrup from Ian’s chin. Christ, how sweet she looked in her Turtle’s-Neck sweater, the cabled one the same color as her skin. Not even six o’clock — *bairns make early risers of all, aye? — and still her eyes were bright and sharp. “It’s Sunday and cold as *b…all-get-out.*”

“I wish I could.” He’d like nothing better than to spend a few stolen hours abed with her while the children napped away the afternoon. “But I canna,” he said, the last piece of toast in his mouth as he began clearing up the dishes. “Promised Hank I would go in and cover for h—”

“DA, Mummy SAID, it’s—”

“*Don’t *interrupt*, Bree,” they chanted with one well-worn voice.

Brianna sighed with even greater exasperation and piled every remaining piece of bacon onto her plate with a grumble that sounded a great deal like. “…interruptin’ me….”

“Brianna Ellen.” Claire’s head tilted, hawk’s eye fixed with deadly precision. “Attitude.”

“S’too *cold* out there, Daddy,” the lass piped at once with saccharine primness that dared anyone to question its sincerity.

“Aye, ’tis cold,” he agreed, sharing a secret, rueful glance with Claire, “and that means the horses will be, too.” He laid a freshly-scrubbed plate onto the rack and took up the next. “Shall ye come along wi’ me to the barn, then, cub?”

“Me?”

“*ME!*” Ian parroted, slithering down from his seat.

“Aye, you, and yer Mam, and Ian? Make a wee outing of it?”

“No-thanks,” came the verdict of the bacon-cruncher. “Dinna wanna put my coat on.”

“Ye lazy wee *baggage!*” He cast over his shoulder for her and spied Claire first, hiding behind her mug. “*No!*… Et tu, *mo nighean donn*?”

“It’s *awfully* warm and cozy indoors….” Her guilty grin gave way to a yawn, then a stretch. “And I really do need to stay,” she said, bringing her stocking-feet up onto the seat and hugging her knees, “*got* to make a dent in these applications today.”

This last rose in crescendo, still barely heard over the din of:

“*CAN I—*”

“*Me-me-meee!!!*”

“*CAN I BE ‘SCUUUSED!?’*”

“Verra well,” he sighed at Claire with a wink, Bree seizing upon this as permission and tearing out of the kitchen while Jamie dried his hands. “I suppose I’ll don my coat and set off *all alone* into the
frigid—"

“Meeeee!!”

At last, he took notice of the smallest Fraser, who had been wrapped around his leg. “Why, hallo, YOU.”

“Go, too?” he asked excitedly in Gaelic, giving a little bounce for emphasis. “Me, too?”

He took a moment to simply marvel. The boy didn’t always choose to speak, but when he did, it never failed to surprise Jamie how much he truly understood of the action swirling about over his head. And to reply to English with Gaelic, forby! Perhaps it shouldn’t be shocking, seeing as how Ian had been hearing it spoken since birth, but Lord, his pronunciation was near perfect as he begged, “Go, too, Daddy?”

“Ye want to come wi’ Da to see the horses, jo?” (in English, for Claire’s sake).

Ian nodded once and beamed, raising his hands expectantly and switching languages without missing a beat. “Go-‘IF!”

Jamie gripped Ian’s wrists and let the lad climb up his front like a mountaineer, grinning as broadly as he. “Go we shall, then!”

“But, shouldn’t–? Jesus H. Christ, I can’t believe I’m asking this, with the chance at a 50% less chaotic day on offer,” Claire laughed, coming to stand with them and rumple Ian’s hair, “but won’t he be in your way?”

“This wee face?” he said, kissing it. “Nay, never.”

It might well be, in actual fact, Jamie admitted as he set the pair off from Fernacre. A child of sixteen months was never a simple matter, even as one as generally agreeable as Ian, but having the lad with him was well worth a bit of disruption here and there.

It wasn’t simply Ian’s acuity that had startled him earlier, but that the lad had asked to go with Da. With him.

His heart melted afresh as he thought on it, as he felt Ian’s head, warm and heavy against his hip.

Naturally, the singular bond with Claire had stayed strong, even past the time he was weaned. Many was the occasion that Ian would suddenly turn from Jamie and wail for her, entirely inconsolable until he might cry against her shoulder and be soothed by her hands, her voice.

There was nothing malicious in the preference, of course. Brianna was a never-ceasing demander of energies and was always happy to fill any vacancy left by her brother. Besides, Jamie could see the wee one’s point, for he likewise had a very strong desire to be held by Claire at all times.

Even so, being singled out himself by the lad was yet new enough that it sent a warm, silly thrill through his chest each time, almost like being a schoolboy again: happily heartsick over his attentions being returned.

“And if it’s no’ being in love,” he murmured as he slowed the car, palm atop the boy’s head, “I haven’t the faintest idea.”
"We-heer?" Ian exclaimed, coming to life and nearly toppling over as he tried to stand on the seat mid-parking. ‘We-heer?’

Scooping him up with one arm, Jamie stepped out into the chill. “Aye, here!” He bent to set Ian down, remembering the great bag of diapering supplies, food, and toys in the back seat. “Off ye g —”

“Nooooo!” The boy turned violently legless, twisting impressively to avoid touching the ground.

“Ian, ye–”

“Hoam-me!”

“Do ye no’ want to walk on your own feet like a big boy?” He already kent well the answer.

His brown-haired lad gave an uncanny impression of Claire’s ‘don’t talk nonsense’ face. “HOAM-me.”

A Sucker he was, wi’ no hope for it whatsoever. He chuckled and sighed, hoisting the lad up higher. “Today you win, joey.”

Strange, thinking back now, that he’d gone the first quarter-century of life knowing nothing of Kangaroos.

He’d first learnt the odd word in the days when his appetite for knowledge of the centuries missed had made trips to the library a near-daily event. Australia— what a wonder that place seemed to him! All that vast expanse, filled with such uncanny creatures. A nightmarish beast, this one had looked from the illustration: like a man-sized hare with a great, thick tail, tapering like a lizard’s; eerily man-like in the arms and chest, capable of leaping thirty feet in one bound before kicking one’s teeth in.

Still, a softer recollection had come straightaway to mind later, when Claire began to carry Ian about the house in a sling on her front. Jenny, too, had worn her bairns, wrapped in a shawl on her back, yet there was something all the more intimate in seeing mother and child nestled chest-to-chest amid the mundane tasks of the day; seeing Claire wrap her arms around him with utter tenderness, whispering soft love; the babe dozing as she worked and moved about, warm and safe in the comfort of her heartbeat, just as he had been in the womb.

Both the nickname and the love of being cuddled had stuck, and it was only sight of the horses of Barn A that coaxed Jamie’s little marsupial down. True-to-form, he hit the stable floor with a hop.

Jamie made quick inspection of his four-footed charges. No need for mucking out, God be praised; just feeding, watering, and a bit of love for each. He began making his way down the first aisle of eight, Ian toddling along to watch, full of quiet wonder.

It had been some time since he’d gotten to be alone—mostly alone— with the horses. Nearly all his working days were spent in the paddocks, training the young or new ones; coaching the riders on how they might better work in harmony with the being beneath them. He loved it, took such pride and joy in witnessing the excitement of human and beast alike as they improved, as they bonded.

Yet it brought his heart a different sort of joy, the quieter sort, to be in the stables on a still morning such as this, gentle mist seeming to soften the hard edges of world and word.

They soon reached the last stall on the eastern side. “How goes it, a nighean?” he crooned to Cornflower, who knocked her snout into his shoulder in companionable greeting.
“Pat him?” Ian asked in the same language, honey-eyes glowing.

“Aye, ye can pat *her.*”

Lifted high, Ian gingerly reached out to touch the mighty neck.

“Morning, Jamie!”

“The same to you!”

He turned them to face Tom, who was coming through the door with two steaming cups.“HEY! Look who came to help his Papa out! Jeez, Jamie, when did he get so darn tall?”

“Tis our constant question, as well!” He set Ian atop a stack of hay bales by Corny’s door and gratefully reached to take the mug.

Tom winked at Ian. “How you doing today, little man?”

“Hiii,” was all Ian said before covering his face so nothing save grinning eyes showed between hat and mittens.

God bless Tom Harper, Jamie prayed sincerely as they sipped and chatted, discussing business, the children, all the usual things. Of all the people in his new life, it was Tom that minded him most of Murtagh: always near, always willing, always irreverant, yet always looking after ye from afar. It wasn’t often he thought of it: but knowing that Tom was only ever a call away should emergency strike or counsel be needed of one with more years of experience in the world was an immense comfort, more than Jamie could ever truly express to the man.

A jubilant shriek erupted from behind them.

Ian had descended the hay bales and was now right underneath Comflower’s stall, head thrown back, both hands reaching up to touch–

“IAN, STO–”

“Mmmm-wah!” Ian kissed the fuzzy snout, right in the spot between the heaving nostrils. He bounced on his heels, chirped ‘Bye!!’ to her in Gaelic, then ran toward the next stall.

Jamie crossed the space in two leaps to yank him backward….but of all the wonders, Hector was already at the front of the stall in response to Ian’s command.

“What’d he say??” Tom whispered.

“He said, ‘Come here.’”

“Whoa….”

The horse had lowered his neck, inspecting Ian judiciously. Jamie kept both hands around the boy’s ribs, half-crouched in readiness to rip him away at the slightest sign of danger….but as though by magic, Hector nudged his snout deliberately into Ian’s outstretched hands with a tiny nicker, getting an enchanting giggle and kiss in return.

“Christ in Heaven…..”

Tom hooted. “I. will. be. DAMNED!!”
Jamie discovered both that his mouth had fallen open and that his son was already in front of the next stall, charming his mark. He and Tom stayed close, heart still thudding in terror of the inevitable crushed finger or nip on the face, but no…. one by one, each horse willingly lowered their nose for a kiss.

It wasn’t just heedless affection young Ian radiated: it was instinct, too. For, when Bard put back his ears and snorted, the lad took a tidy step backward, not offended in the slightest. He only gave the brute a cheery wave and moved on to find his next sweetheart.

“Well done, a bhalach!” he laughed, giving the lad a squeeze.

“Fanks!” Ian wriggled out without a backward glance, intent on his mission.

Tom groaned as he settled onto a bench, beckoning Jamie to do the same. “So little Ian takes to horses a bit more naturally than Brianna, huh?”

“Aye…” Jamie exhaled heavily, allowing himself to sit and relax. “He’s got a way about him.”

Tom resumed sipping his coffee (Jamie’s somewhere on the floor), watching Ian and chuckling. “You do crank out some damned cute kiddos, Jamie.”

“I do have a damned cute wife.”

They laughed and Jamie’s mind wandered, even as they continued to chat, even as he kept Ian in the corner of his vision.

Strange, no? How bairns can be so similar in some ways and yet so different in others. Bree, with her warrior spirit, indomitable, was nearly as frightened of horses now as the first time he’d brought her here. This morning she had blamed the coat and the cold, but Jamie knew it was more to do with the great stomping hooves and enormous teeth. Never would she admit fear, of course. She would fluster and put on that wee glower he loved so well, but beneath it, the lass was petrified.

Contrast this with Ian, for all he might be the more quiet and cautious in life as a whole, who showed no fear whatsoever here in the stable. True, he had seen horses before, even ridden one on Jamie’s lap, so there was no factor of shock as there had been with Bree. Still… Strength and courage manifests to each of us in our own way. A comforting thought, in this ever-changing world, no? Unlike Jenny and Ian, he had not one clue how his children might spend their lives once grown, so many paths being available to them. It weighed heavily on him some days— but if they each find their strength, wheresoever it might lie, then surely they shall find their own prosperous path, as well….

Sounds of human and equine unease sent his head whipping round. Merlin, one of the younger horses of this bunch, was standing in the window with no apparent intent to lower his head. Ian was grunting, jumping up and down to get the laddie’s attention with a persistent, “Hiii? HIIIII???” on repeat.

“He may no’ wish to talk just now, Ian.”

The boy whirled eagerly and pointed back up over his shoulder. “Up, Da?” Without waiting for an answer, he sprinted over, eyes bright with urgency. “Da, Up! Up, ‘kay?”

“I think you’d better pick him up, Jamie, before he blows a gasket,” groaned Tom as he stood, heading toward to door to continue his day.

“Take it easy, Tom,” he called.
“You do the same!”

“Daaaaaa, UPPP???”

He heard Tom’s infectious laugh vanish into the distance.

“Easy now,” he murmured to the horse in Gaelic as they approached, reaching out his free hand to carefully rub the long, white neck. Merlin blew out through his nostrils. “Aye, I ken, your wizardship, ’tis a bit unconventional, but the wee thing just wants to say hello, aye? Can ye find it in your heart?”

“No scary,” Ian promised.

With sudden inspiration, Jamie rifled in his coat pocket and held out the contents to the wary brute. “And what say ye now, friend?”

Merlin held back a moment for dignity, then descended upon his treat.

“W’ is it?” demanded Ian, back to English in his curiosity.

“Give me your hand—” Jamie pulled the mitten off with his teeth. “Cup your fingers like a wee bowl, aye?”

Ian peered into his palm. “…..’Is ’at, Daddy?”

“Tis a sugar cube. Shall we see if he’d like some more?”

Ian’s eyes lit up and he swiveled around toward the horse so suddenly he dropped the cube. Once resupplied, he held his arm out at full length, bellowing, “Hiiiii!”

Ian squealed in delight as the huge lips and teeth explored his hand. “Mooorr-Da!”

Many, many sugar cubes later, Jamie crouched to set Ian on his feet, but the lad flung his arms about Jamie’s neck with an insistent “Nnnhhhh!”

“Christ, you’re truly naught but a barnacle wi’ legs!” Jamie gave up, kissing the boy’s capped head. “If I ever thought your sister was a cuddly sort, there was no fathoming what was to come, wee jo.”

“Moor-coops?” Ian asked, popping up to search Jamie’s face.

Jamie checked his pocket, coming up with one last sugar cube. Ian didn’t miss a beat. He took it between his fingers, said ‘Heer-Da,’ and pressed it firmly against Jamie’s lips.

“You’re a sweet one, a chuisle,” Jamie said, crunching the sugar and kissing the hand. “And you’re lucky the horses didna chomp all your wee fingers off—!!”

Ian squealed as Jamie made play of gobbling them up, his little belly shaking with giggles so deep he began turning red.

“Alllllright, lad,” Jamie soothed after a time, before the lad exploded, “we’d best be going.”

“Go home?”
“Nay, no’ until later. We have three more barns to check, yet. Let’s hope ye have enough kisses left in ye.”

He did.

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